The Paradoxes of Im/mobility in Central American Transit Migration in Mexico

Heather Wurtz

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Abstract

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This study examines the various ways that Central American migrants traversing Mexico's southern border interpret, negotiate, and resist conditions of immobilization imposed by state refugee policy and other institutional impediments to northbound movement. My findings are informed by 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Tapachula, Chiapas, followed by an additional six, non-consecutive weeks in various sites of transit across Mexico as a Human Rights Observer in the migrant caravans of 2017 and 2018. Since 2011, as a result of increasing rates of violence, flows of Central American women, youth, and families across Mexico's southern border have risen substantially. In efforts to curb northbound movement, the US has exerted significant pressure for the Mexican government to assume a greater role in the retention, organization, and deterrence of prospective refugee populations, resulting in the temporary resettlement along the southern border of thousands of migrants seeking international protection. Many of these migrants find themselves in a liminal space of legal and social uncertainty in which they must contend with a range of limitations and distinct possibilities as they consider their ongoing trajectories. Through close attention to the social worlds that emerge around and within migrants' transit communities, I explore central themes related to the existentiality of im/mobility, gendered experiences of transit migration, the paradoxes of institutional practices of refugee protection within predominant transit zones, and diverse forms of resilience and coping that are given breadth through collective travel. Ultimately, I argue that it is critical to explore the narratives and lived realities of those most affected by migration-centered policy and

discourse, and to recognize the critical role that migrants play in challenging and reimagining the terms of their in/exclusion.

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Abbreviations

ACNUR	*Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiado* **[**United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)]
CDH Fray Matías	*Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova, AC* [Fray Matías de Córdova Center for Human Rights, AC]
CNDH	*Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos* [National Human Rights Committee of Mexico]
COMAR	*Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados* [Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid]
DFS	*Diversidad Sin Fronteras* [Diversity Without Borders Trans Gay Migrant Caravan]
DIF	*El Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia* [National System for Integral Family Development]
ICE	United States Immigrant Customs and Enforcement agency
INM	*Instituto Nacional de Migración* [National Migration Institute of Mexico]
PSF	*Pueblo Sin Fronteras* [People Without Borders]
TQLM	*La Familia* Trans and Queer Liberation Movement (TQLM)

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Introduction

LIFE IN A BORDERLAND WAY STATION

On a bustling side street near the center of Tapachula, Mexico, in front of an unmarked building surrounded by tall fences lined with barbed wire, the complicated global dynamics of migrant (im)mobility manifest within a microsphere of local, daily life. The building is the Mexico Commission for Refugee Aid (COMAR) – operated by a handful of government workers who come from all over the country to Tapachula, the busiest migrant corridor south of the United States, to make the most of the limited resources available to manage an overwhelming and ever-expanding caseload of refugee applications.

Before the sun comes up, a line of refugee applicants forms outside the main entrance of the gate: a small group of single Central American women with children commiserate about the discomforts of transient life; two Cuban men, sporting fashionable watches and ball caps, laugh as they swap stories about life before migration – a not so distant past; and an Indigenous man in his fifties from rural Guatemala, with worn jeans and weathered skin, stares solemnly into the rising sun. Even though they arrived at COMAR before dawn, they will be there for hours, contending with the infamous Tapachula heat, as they await the first of a series of obligatory appointments filled with paperwork, interviews, and intimating bureaucratic timelines, in attempts to gain refugee status.

Some will buy *papusas* and Cokes from Beti, a Salvadoran woman who settled in Tapachula with her teenage son after they were twice denied refugee status. Others will try to ignore the growing hunger pangs, spending their last five pesos on sweets to pacify their children until they can return to the migrant shelter for the mid-day meal of tortillas, rice, and beans. They clutch tightly their plastic folders, which contain what are now the most valuable possessions

that they own: copies of their identification papers, COMAR stamped documents that verify their legal presence in Tapachula, news articles to prove reasonable cause for seeking asylum. They bear their folders like shields as a truck full of police with machine guns slung across their chests slowly passes by. These migrant men and women are paving a new road for which no foundation exists: what only a few years before used to be a night or two at a depot on the outskirts of town, now makes them a central focus of public gaze as they navigate new dynamics and a range of possibilities for their diverse mobile trajectories.

Throughout 2016-2017, I conducted fieldwork on the lived experiences of Central American migrants in Tapachula. I spent countless days in front of COMAR, accompanying men and women to the front gate of the building; chatting with them about their uncertainties and doubts; and lending an ear to their frustration and anger when their cases were denied. During the migrant caravan of 2017, I watched that same space transform from a bureaucratic zone of imposed waiting and state compliance to a site of civil resistance, as a bullhorn was passed around the sprawling crowd of migrants and their advocates who gave voice to the injustices of a broken refugee regime. With protest signs hoisted high into the air, they then set out on a march that would stretch thousands of miles until their arrival in Tijuana. Their mobility had been continuously stalled, regulated, and denied; now they were taking it back and rewriting the terms of their trajectories according to their own mobility imaginaries.

Tapachula was an ideal site from which to observe the complex dynamics and emergent phenomena of an evolving refugee regime along the southern Mexico border. Although the Southern Mexico border is intimately connected to patterns of immigration not only to, but within, the United States, it has received scant attention within social science and migration scholarship, particularly in comparison to the substantial body of extant literature focused on the

US-Mexico border (Ruíz and Tiano 1987; Alvarez 1995; Segura and Zavella 2007; Diaz 2015; Vélez-Ibañez and Heyman 2017). However, in the early 2000's, following the "crisis" of the arrival of tens of thousands of unaccompanied, Central American minors at US gates, we began to see a considerable shift in interest in Mexico's "other border" (Meyer and Isacson 2019), from both a scholarly and political standpoint, with increasing recognition of the reality that, for many migrants, the journey ends (and may begin again) much farther south.

This study examines the various ways that Central American migrants traversing Mexico's southern border interpret, negotiate, and resist conditions of immobilization imposed by state refugee policy and other institutional impediments to northbound movement. My findings are informed by 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Tapachula, Chiapas, followed by an additional six, non-consecutive weeks in various sites of transit across Mexico as a Human Rights Observer during the migrant caravans of 2017 and 2018. Drawing on an "experience-near" approach to sociocultural phenomena, this study contributes to a growing body of contemporary migration scholarship that focuses on the journey that occurs between the sites from which migrants depart and their desired destinations, generating new insights into what Frank-Vitale and others have described as "the human condition of being in between" (Frank-Vitale 2020; Arriola Vega 2012).

As I will show in the chapters that follow, spaces of (im)mobility entail much more than physical movement and stasis; they are sites of complex social dynamics and intensely emotional experience that probe fundamental questions about human fortitude and survival. Through close attention to the social worlds that emerge around and within migrants' transit communities, I explore central themes related to the existentiality of im/mobility, gendered experiences of transit migration, the paradoxes of institutional practices of refugee protection within predominant

transit zones, and diverse forms of resilience and coping that are given breadth through collective travel. My findings emerge not from a single site, but rather from a series of locations intimately linked by the variegated and unpredictable events of stalled, accelerated, and circuitous motion that delineate the migrant journey. From within spaces of transit, migrants' stories give meaning to movement in ways that can only be fully understood when considered within the arc of their trajectories. In light of ongoing public debates and political struggles over access to mobility as a human right, I argue that it is critical to explore the narratives and lived realities of those most affected by migration-centered policy and discourse, and to recognize the critical role that migrants play in challenging and reimagining the terms of their in/exclusion.

In this introductory chapter, I will first provide some brief background on the shifting nature of migration and refugee management along the southern Mexico border. This will be only a basic overview, as I go into a much more detailed discussion of the historical and political context of Central American migration in Chapter One. Following the background section, I will provide information about key dimensions of my ethnographic approach, including the intellectual contribution of ethnography, a fine-grain description of the primary research site and research sample, and information about the study's methodology, analysis, dissemination of findings, and ethics. I conclude with an overview of the structure of the monograph with brief chapter-by-chapter synopses.

Figure 1: Map of Mexico: Tapachula (TAP) and Tijuana (TIJ) indicated by blue arrows

Refugee Regulation and Entrapment along Mexico's Most Expansive Point of Entry

Every year hundreds of thousands of Central American migrants travel through Mexico, bound for the United States (Department of Homeland Security 2021). Yet, it has been estimated that only 20% of those who begin the journey make it to the northern border (Yarris and Castañeda 2014). This has often been attributed to factors such as violence, crime, and various forms of bodily affliction that occur *en route*, such as limb loss, illness, sexual violence, and unintended pregnancy. However, as a result of shifts in refugee management along the Mexico-Guatemala border, asylum itself has become a new, dominant driver behind disrupted migrant journeys. Under the conditions of the new refugee regime, delayed and deterred northbound mobility occurs in other ways, namely through the bureaucratic and legal stipulations associated with

seeking international protection through asylum.

Despite substantial evidence of increased rates of violence and crime directed toward migrants in border regions of Mexico (EMIF 2019; MSF 2019), Mexican refugee policy stipulates that refugee applicants must remain in the state where they file their refugee application for the duration of case review (which is almost always along the southern Mexican border). Although state transfers may be granted in exceptional circumstances to eligible candidates, transfers can take months to be approved and are completely denied to those who were apprehended by migration agents before they managed to reach asylum authorities. It is also important to note that travel through Mexico by freight train (commonly known as "*La Bestia*"), has become increasingly dangerous for migrants. Although migrants used to face very little opposition from public authorities, since 2014, the state has implemented advanced measures to deter migrants from boarding the freight train, including increased border patrols and surveillance of trains; the construction of concrete structures to prevent migrants from running alongside the train to board; and policies that have increased the regulated speed of the train (O'Connor, Batalova, and Bolter 2019).

Through the combination of new policies of refugee management and measures of migration control (alongside various other risk factors related to organized crime, gang violence, and environmental danger) the stakes of covert travel have been significantly intensified since the mid-2000s. Today, migrants who arrive in Tapachula must weigh the risks and benefits of two prospective trajectories: remain in Tapachula for months or more until their refugee case comes to a conclusion, or risk the dangers of irregular, independent travel. For many migrants, especially those with small children or other forms of increased vulnerability, the latter option seems wholly out of reach.

In light of these circumstances, and as a primary point of entry into Mexico from Guatemala, Tapachula has become a hub for asylum seekers and place of temporary resettlement while they await the adjudication of their refugee cases. The period of resettlement generally spans four to six months on average, although it can easily take up to a year or more, depending on the situation. During this time, the experiences and outcomes of people on the move are heavily influenced by a relatively new and rapidly evolving refugee regime – an assemblage of coordinated (and at times, competing) organizational activities across diverse fields such as human rights, humanitarianism, peace-keeping and development, in addition to national security. As reflected in comparative sites across the globe (Betts 2010), the emergent refugee regime along the Southern Mexico border is rapidly reshaping the politics of refugee protection, along with new social worlds and complex social dynamics that emerge at the interface of migrant-institutional engagement.

During my fieldwork in Tapachula, I found myself at the epicenter of these shifting dynamics, as migrants, institutions, and local communities alike, struggled to adapt to the new demands of refugee management. Migrant shelters that had focused for years on meeting short-term, basic humanitarian needs of young adult migrants passing through town, now found themselves struggling with the challenges of accommodating individuals from multiple walks of life whose imagined pit-stops in border towns had become extended stays for weeks, months, or even years in temporary resettlement. In turn, migrants were forced to contend with the difficult and often dangerous conditions of the under-resourced and over-burdened transit locations in which they were involuntarily suspended, including endemic poverty, violence and crime, and lack of access to adequate services and resources. For many migrants whom I met in Tapachula, such periods of disrupted mobility completely shifted their original trajectories. Indeed, some

never managed to leave: swept up by the possibilities of resettlement (e.g., marriage, steady work) or as their stamina to continue the journey waned, or was completely extinguished by mental exhaustion, the risks of undocumented travel, or by acts of violence and homicide. In the words of one activist I interviewed in Tapachula: "The Southern border is like a giant fish net; migrants get trapped, and sometimes they never break free."

During periods of prolonged immobility, migrants continue to experience the long arm of the border enforcement apparatus, which seeps into everyday life through a variety of institutions and social encounters. For example, as I found in my research, even though Mexican law guarantees migrants the right to health care and various social services despite immigration status, Central American migrants face a range of barriers in availing themselves of those rights, including difficulties navigating convoluted bureaucratic procedures; experiences of covert or explicit discrimination within both institutions and public sites; and outright denial of social services by mid-level bureaucrats, such as physicians, social workers, and migration officials. In other cases, migrants avoid state institutions altogether due to discrimination, stigmatization, and fear of deportation.

Migrants with pending refugee cases also struggle significantly with chronic unemployment and dependency on humanitarian aid, and they spend long days filled with inactivity and boredom. Although the United Nations Commission for Refugee Assistance (ACNUR) provides some economic support to asylum-seekers during the application process, it does not adequately cover all necessary living expenses, and so many migrants are unable to access aid to its full extent. Furthermore, all assistance is withdrawn as soon as migrants receive case resolution. The only type of work available to migrants without regularized status pays very little (on average around $80-120 pesos per day, approximately $4-6 USD) and is highly

precarious, inconsistent, and exploitative. Migrants frequently experience discrimination, withheld wages, and various forms of physical, sexual, and verbal abuse within work sites. Women face additional challenges. Women with small children who search for work are further inhibited by caretaking responsibilities and the inability to pay for childcare. It is through such processes that a complex system of social sorting is constituted, with profound material and health consequences (Lubheid 2013; Povinelli 2011).

Immersed within this southern border microsphere of migration, I observed a constant interplay of power and resistance, along with myriad forms of acquiescence, constrained agency, and negotiation, among migrants marooned and in the throes of improvised survival in an unfamiliar borderland. As individuals struggled to confront the trying conditions of prolonged and unanticipated delays along the course of their journeys, they found themselves in situations that, even days before their departures, they may have never imagined, including situations of risk and danger, but also moments rich with human connectedness and solidarity.

US society has become accustomed to common portrayals within popular culture and news accounts of migrants traveling through Mexico as defined by a seemingly endless montage of movement, action, and extraordinary circumstances. Think, for example, about the scenes of fast-moving trains and covert "safe houses" that flash across our television screens or pop up in our newsreels, in which migrants are constantly dangling at the edge of a crisis, in constant need of aid and respite. This is also true, to some extent, among much of the extant scholarship. While many studies document the desperate conditions and sources of aid for migrants passing from one migrant shelter to the next (Holmes 2013; DeLeon 2015; W. Vogt 2018), few focus on the quotidian conditions of those who remain in transit zones and must negotiate changing circumstances and navigate a new course of action amidst mounting uncertainty and associated

immobility. This is the focus of my study.

As I seek to demonstrate, my experiences with migrants in transit reveal a much fuller picture. Although life in Tapachula certainly took on an exceptional quality for many migrants, driven by the uncertainty of the circumstances and strangeness of the surroundings, life was also banal and quotidian (e.g., marked by daily routines and small talk) and demarcated by many not so extraordinary life events. Throughout my fieldwork, I attended weddings, funerals, and birthday parties of my interlocutors; babies were born and lost; some people found work; and others found partners, lovers and friends. Even along *el camino* [the road], I realized, life goes on.

This study examines the daily realities of Central American migrants seeking international protection along both of Mexico's borders, with particular attention to less explored dimensions of social experience that arise from distinct, yet quotidian, spaces of physical movement and stasis. As I will further discuss in Chapter One, there is a substantial body of scholarship within contemporary migration studies that centers on "transit migration," or what has been simply described as "movements of people from a supposed country of origin through various countries en route until they arrive in a supposedly final destination country" (Collyer, Düvell, and de Haas 2012: 412). However, much of the published literature on this type of migration in the Americas tends to focus on what is commonly considered critical sites of migrant engagement along the journey – migrant shelters, detention centers, the often hazardous terrains and modes of transport that typify the dangerous trek (e.g., trains, deserts, rivers, etc.). There has been far less consideration of the events and relations that emerge from within spaces of *stalled migration*: in light of the mesmerizing force of the passing train, who gives a second thought to the way station that proceeded its arrival? In other words, much of this study is about

the way station, or the material and metaphysical experiences of migrants *suspended in motion*, despite the continuous impulse to move forward, propelled by the exigencies of survival. The journey (the passing train) is also central to the story but always set in relation to the immobilizing forces that give meaning to the power of its movement.

To this aim, in the chapters that follow, I focus on the everyday struggles of Central American migrants as they attempt to cope with and adapt to unanticipated periods of immobilization that result in short- or medium-term resettlement along the southern Mexico border. I describe poignant and often painful social consequences of state measures to control and manage mobility along this border, in addition to some of the incredible displays of human fortitude and resourcefulness that have emerged from people's responses to repression and vulnerability. Throughout, I pay careful attention to differences in experiences across key axis of social diversity, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality.

This is first achieved through an experience-near approach to women's encounters with institutions and policies of refugee aid and regulation. In these accounts, I trace ways in which the outcomes and opportunities of women are shaped by the intersection of normative gender ideals and a *mobility imaginary* (or their social perceptions about the terms and conditions that define access to mobility) that undergird their experiences with institutional logics and practices. I then turn to ways in which the terms of mobility have being reimagined and performed by migrants and their affiliates within the context of grassroots organizing and collective travel. Drawing on two distinct cases of migrants who participated in the migrant caravan movements of 2017 and 2018, I explore social, spiritual, and existential dimensions of collective mobility that set the foundation for practices of resilience and civic engagement.

Ethnography of Im/mobility and Displacement

The Broader Significance and Unique Contribution of an Ethnographic Approach

I conducted this study over approximately 14 non-consecutive months between August 2016 and May 2018. Research methodologies included archival research, participant-observation, and in-depth interviews. The ensemble of ethnographic methods is well suited for situating local phenomena within a broader social and politico-economic contexts, allowing a high degree of cultural specificity while still generating rich comparative perspective of large-scale global processes (Schensul and LeCompte 2012).

Contrary to dominant understandings of transit migration as a unidirectional, continuous process, migrant trajectories are highly variable and contingent upon a complicated interaction of structural and individual factors, such as institutional policy, emergent opportunities or unanticipated dilemmas, the establishment of social ties, and subjective experience (Arriola Vega 2012; Basok, Belanger, and Luz Rojas Wiesner 2015). However, even those studies that discuss transit migration as a multi-staged or circular process rarely recognize migrants who "get stuck" along the way and the various factors that structure their trajectories. In the following chapters, this phenomenon of stalled migration is primarily explored through experiences of "waiting," as a key analytic, as well as, less explicitly, through other mechanisms of deterrence and acquiescence that constrain migrants' desired mobility. Ethnographic methodology is well suited to capture the complexities of these dynamics and other on-the-ground issues in borderland regions without erasing the broader context of political and economic inequality. By privileging the narratives of migrants, through "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of their everyday experiences and social conditions, this research aims to problematize dominant framings that reduce migrant lives to legal status, and borderlands to their geopolitical purpose.

In popular discourse, borders are highly symbolic and politicized constructs that tend to lack ambiguity and propagate an "us versus them" mentality. They are commonly portrayed as abject spaces of marginalization and hostility (Isin and Rygiel 2007), militarized regions that uphold strict geopolitical divisions, rather than complex, historically rich cartographies of cultural hybridity and social transformation [for an example of the latter see: (Sahlins 1989)]. The heterogeneity of migrant experience and diverse social configurations that emerge not merely at borders, but within border regions, are often eclipsed through overly simplified frameworks of "illegality." Dominant framing of the "illegal immigrant" naturalizes the inequalities of migration regimes, blaming migrants for their conditions, while obscuring the multiple power relations and distinct histories through which "illegality" is constructed (Lubheid 2013). Attention to the rich social texture and diversity of migrants' lives may help to destabilize the legal/illegal binary, to challenge common assumptions and stereotypes, and to cast new light on the inhumane migration policies that continue to drive deplorable levels of migrant death and affliction.

The ethnographic approach of this project also provides a unique window onto relations of care and embodied subjectivity among displaced people. Examining life in conditions of temporal and spatial displacement, which typifies migrant experience in the Mexico borderlands, raises new questions about social belonging and the formation of social, affective, and political lives under transient and unpredictable conditions (Ahmed 2004; 1999; Smith 1994). Such experiences may provide new avenues through which to rethink conventional understandings about what constitutes community (beyond contexts of permanency and familiarity), practices of care (esp. informal social configurations), and the grounds for political inclusion (control versus integration). I employ empirical work to explore beyond these conceptual boundaries; in doing

so, this study facilitates novel inquiries into the relationship between power and mobility, and the possibilities (and perils) of care relations that emerge at the edges of boundaries in a globalized world where borders are in flux. I also interrogate the role of gender in experiences and outcomes of im/mobility, with particular emphasis on the accounts of women migrants in transit, a perspective that has been largely underrepresented in the migration literature (DeLeon 2015).

Attentiveness to the everyday experiences and social conditions of migrants delayed en route may add to public debates and commentary such on issues like state sovereignty, immigrant rights, and the legitimacy of national borders. It may also offer important insight on how to think about and respond to traumatic events across diverse regions and migratory contexts. At a time when one in seven people of the global population is a migrant of some form (International Organization for Migration (IOM) 2021) and risks of migration-related trauma continue to escalate, it is critical to gain an informed and nuanced understanding of the meanings and consequences of adverse events that occur during migration, as well as the social responses that may help or hinder effective pathways of resilience.

Research Setting

Formal data collection began in August 2016, in Tapachula, Chiapas, where I resided until the following September 2017. Tapachula is the southernmost city of the Soconusco region of Chiapas, which is Mexico's poorest state with 74.7% of the population living in poverty (Isacson and Meyer 2014). It is nestled along the Mexico-Guatemalan border, delineated by the Suchiate River and the Pacific Ocean, and has a population of approximately 320,000 people. Tapachula has a long history of circular migration from Central America, beginning with the establishment of local coffee plantations in the 19th century, through the devastating civil wars in Central America in the 1980's, and onward. Today, the city is an economically rich center for

agribusiness (esp., tropical fruit and coffee) and commerce and a major port of entry between Mexico and Central America, resulting in a high degree of mobility across the southern Mexico border. In addition, it is estimate that every year hundreds of thousands of Central Americans cross through illicit channels (Department of Homeland Security 2021), facing risks of violence, accidents, and harsh environmental conditions[1]. Tapachula is also a hub for legal and illicit commercial sex work. Next to Mexico City, it has the country's second highest rate of human sex trafficking. The majority of sex workers are Central American migrants who enter into the trade with varying levels of coercion in order to save money to continue the journey north, especially following adverse events such as deportation, debt, robbery, and sexual assault (International Labor Organization 2020; Moloney, 2017).

Despite new initiatives to protect the human rights of migrants, espoused in Mexico's 2011 immigration reform law, migrants in the region continue to experience abuse by corrupt authorities and crime syndicates, and they face high levels of stigma and discrimination. Local residents in Tapachula often blame increasing rates of crime, violence, youth delinquency, and HIV transmission on the influx of Central American migration, including the substantial proportion of sex workers and indigenous people who originate from Central American countries (Infante, Aggleton, and Pridmore 2009; Truby 2014).

Fieldwork in Tapachula allowed me to fully immerse myself within a complex and rapidly shifting microsphere of migration along the southern Mexico border, including a vast institutional landscape of migrant aid groups and regulations, as well as a diverse community of regional and transnational migrants. Due to its proximity to the border and growing national concern with transit migration, Tapachula has a fairly well-established institutional landscape for addressing migrant needs. However, insufficient government assistance and other political and

administrative obstacles (e.g., institutional mismanagement, lack of coordination across institutions) limit the capacity of civil society organizations, which are often under-resourced and cannot easily accommodate the increasing demands of the migrant population.

Furthermore, as I found in my research, and which has been confirmed in other accounts (Sanchez 2013; Leyva-Flores et al. 2019), migrants commonly fear or mistrust formal institutions (especially government-run agencies). Consequently, migrants often turn to local migrant shelters for aid and support, rather than seeking out assistance from institutions that specialize in specific areas of intervention, such as legal protection from violence or beyond basic healthcare. This is often the case for migrants even after medium- and long-term resettlement. However, relying on shelters has its pitfalls. The extent of support that local migrant shelters are able to provide varies widely and, beyond meeting immediate needs, most heavily depends on the capacity and follow-through of organizational referrals. Many times, especially in the more complicated cases, migrants find themselves shuffled from one organization to the next without ever reaching a meaningful resolution to the issues at hand.

For example, when Daniela, a 32-year-old woman from Honduras, began to experience abdominal pain and vaginal bleeding, the migrant shelter where she was residing helped facilitate transportation and admission to the Tapachula General Hospital. However, after she was diagnosed with stage-three ovarian cancer, her chances for a life-saving operation grew more and more grim: she faced debilitating challenges with the costs of medical supplies and the ability to find voluntary blood donors, alongside deliberate scheduling delays, ineffective communication, and a number of unwieldy, bureaucratic obstacles imposed by the hospital administration. In Daniela's opinion (and which is also my firm belief), without the advocacy of my research assistant and myself, including leveraging key connections that I had established through my

research within the hospital leadership staff and securing financial support through international donations, Daniela never would have left Tapachula alive. Local migrant shelters simply do not have the capacity – the resources, time, or connections – to help individuals navigate complex situations and needs that extend beyond the primary arena of migration itself.

Before I continue on to discuss my research sample, I would like to pause here to go into greater detail about the complex institutional landscape of refugee reception, management, and humanitarian assistance in Tapachula. This will set the stage for everything that follows in the proceeding chapters by allowing readers to better understand and visualize the context through which the ethnographic portrait of this study unfolds. A descriptive account of the institutional infrastructure is also essential for grasping key arguments raised throughout the monograph, first, related to how institutions are implicated in processes of immobilization as a potent function of power, and, secondly, about what is at stake for the migrant individuals and communities thrust into these dynamics.

Tapachula is approximately 23 miles (37.3 kilometers) from the Suchiate River, which delineates the physical border between Mexico and Guatemala. Central American migrants who arrive in Tapachula typically enter Mexico by crossing the Suchiate River from Tecun Uman, Guatemala into the Mexican border town of Ciudad Hidalgo. The Suchiate River is a site of intense commerce and trade between the two countries. Every day, hundreds of people cross the river for economic and other activities. This is facilitated via an informal ferry system, in which local men operate rudimentary rafts, consisting of several long, wooden logs fastened to two large black inner tubes, to transport people to and from Mexico for a negotiated fee (Figure 2). Despite the fact that the ferry entrance deck is within sight of the official Mexican port of entry, located on the nearby overhead bridge, movement across the river is nearly completely

unregulated.

Figure Two: Photograph of rafts crossing the Suchiate River in Tapachula, Chiapas, 2016 (photograph by author)

After migrants cross the Suchiate River, they typically arrive in Tapachula either by transportation in a shared van or taxi (if they have money to pay), or by walking on foot. Their first site of arrival tends to be one out of the two most prominent migrant shelters in Tapachula, *Nuestro Padre* or *El Hogar de los Migrantes* [Our Father or The Migrant Home] (pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality) . Both shelters are intentionally located on the outskirts of town in order to serve as key reception sites and initial points of entry for new arrivals. Although both shelters provide only limited stays (3-5 days on average), *Nuestro Padre* provides medium- and long-term accommodations (typically 1-3 months) for certain vulnerable

populations, including those suffering from illness or injury, women with children, and family units. Therefore, it tends to have a higher level of security. This means that the doors are always locked and visitors must check in with a hired guard in order to enter and leave the premises. I provide more detail about *Nuestro Padre* because it is the shelter where I had an established research affiliation and, therefore, was the site at which I spent considerably more time. However, I will highlight some key differences between the two shelters as I proceed in the description.

Nuestro Padre was originally founded in the 1990s by a Catholic nun in order to provide convalescence and support to migrants who had suffered limb loss. Upon entrance, the shelter consists of several enclosed structures surrounding an open-air courtyard in the center. The administrative center is located to the immediate left, followed by a small first-aid station containing basic medical supplies and donated medications. These rooms are always locked when not in use by authorized personnel. Continuing counter-clockwise, one finds a kitchen and dining hall that is also used for educational and other activities, followed by the women's dormitory filled with bunkbeds. Across from the women's dormitory is additional housing reserved for people recovering from illness or injury, then, to the right side of the main entrance, one finds the men's dormitory. Each dormitory has its own set of shared bathrooms. Benches are located in the center of the courtyard as a shared space for relaxation and leisure. The area behind the courtyard had not been fully developed and, at the time, was still covered by earth floors and trees. There is a space for making tortillas over an open fire pit; a small building under construction (meant eventually to serve as a workshop for education and training); and three individual housing units, containing one room with 2-3 mattresses and a private bathroom, for families who had been extended the opportunity to stay for a month or more.

When I was there, the shelter was able to accommodate approximately 75 migrants and was generally at full capacity, with a monthly rate of accommodation of 350-450 migrants. However, during the day it was sparsely populated, as the majority of the men and many of the women left the shelter to seek temporary work or to engage in other activities. Children generally accompanied their mothers in their daily activities. The shelter was closed to coming and going between 9:00 am and 5:00 pm, meaning that once you left, you were not allowed back inside until the time of re-entry at 5:00 pm. Exceptions were made for migrants who had obligatory appointments at COMAR or walk-in visits at the nearby health clinic. Two meals were served per day: at 9:00 am in the morning and then around 5:30 pm, generally consisting of rice, beans, and tortillas. Clothing and basic supplies (e.g., diapers) were sometimes available to migrants, although this varied depending on the ebb and flow of monetary and material donations. Similarly, at times, basic health care services were available, although this also depended on the availability of volunteer healthcare professionals. During the six months that I had a regular presence at the shelter, I only observed this on one occasion, which resulted directly from my own role in coordinating volunteer services provided by a friend and fourth-year medical student visiting from the United States. Similarly, I rarely observed scheduled events or activities, beyond those that I organized as the shelter's sole volunteer (e.g., weekly English classes, art activities).

There was a small store based out of the migrant shelter where things like sodas, candies, and chips could be purchased. Migrants also had access to public transportation via shared vans that randomly passed by the shelter and could be taken to the center of town. The shelter sometimes provided the five pesos needed to access transportation to town, although migrants were strongly encouraged to find their own means for acquiring transportation and other services

and supplies. Migrants who arrive past the 9:00 pm curfew, who had overstayed their allotted time at the shelter, or who were visibly inebriated, were denied re-entry.

Nuestro Padre had limited staff and high staff turnover. I imagine that this was the result of the high demands of employment at the shelter and relatively low pay, although there also seemed to be a lot of conflict between employees and shelter management. There was generally one primary shelter manager present at the shelter throughout the day and hired guards who were at the shelter around the clock. When I first began regular activities at *Nuestro Padre*, there was also a hired counselor, although she resigned shortly after my arrival. There were occasionally visits from local organizations, like ACNUR or Grupo Beta, although their visits were generally brief and did not seem to adhere to an established schedule.

The other predominant migrant shelter, *El Hogar,* was originally founded and continues to be managed by a Scalibrini priest. It did not have a full-time guard and had, in general, a more open and accessible ambiance. There was less blatant institutional discrimination against LGBTQ migrants, and therefore, was more heavily populated by this sub-group. It was quite similar to *Nuestro Padre* in terms of the mandated meal times, as well as the closed-door daytime policy. In contrast to *Nuestro Padre*, *El Hogar* had a robust program for basic healthcare services, including daily clinical hours provided by a licensed physician, regular HIV testing, and health education courses. *El Hogar* also had a full-time counselor, as well as a newly established three-month training program for migrants in areas such as baking and refrigeration maintenance.

Both migrant shelters are located on the outskirts of town, where they serve as migrants' first point of access along common migratory walking trails leading to Tapachula from the border. These areas are commonly associated with higher rates of violence and crime. Therefore,

although I frequented both locations and engaged in nearly daily visits to *Nuestro Padre* during the first several months in the field, I always did so in the company of my research assistant and rarely spent time at either location after dark for reasons of personal security.

There were some exceptional cases of migrants who were granted long-term accommodations at *Nuestro Padre* or the shelter's affiliated safe house for vulnerable families, whose location was withheld from public knowledge. Elsewhere in town, there were also two women-only shelters for victims of gender-based violence that provided long-term housing, about which I will go into more detail in Chapter Two. Most migrants, however, were highly compelled, by both shelter policies and the deplorable shelter conditions, to seek alternative housing arrangements as quickly as possible. This necessarily entailed frequent trips to the center of town (about a 30-minute drive from the shelters), where nearly all other social service organizations and agencies are located. Many migrants went directly to the *Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiado (ACNUR)* [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)] following their first or second appointment at *Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (COMAR)* [Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid,] in order to solicit assistance with lodging and sustenance. In theory, ACNUR provided direct financial support to migrants in need of housing and food during the course of their application period. However, funding support barely covered people's basic needs and was rarely given out for the full extent of refugee case review. Most migrants ended up in low-income housing in precarious areas of town, generally supported by a combination of ACNUR funds and money generated through random work opportunities or other sources (e.g., asking for money in the streets, money sent by relatives). Given the economic limitations, it was not uncommon to see three or four migrant

women and their children sharing a one-room apartment in a single ground-floor complex of ten to fifteen units, with one, shared bathroom area.

Let me walk you through a typical apartment. After entering the front gate and walking down a long concrete alleyway, you come to the front door, which could be more aptly described as a heavy steel gate with an internal slide lock. As you enter the apartment, the lighting is so weak that you feel like you are walking into shadows. Once your eyes adjust, you see a one-room structure with a concrete floor, concrete walls, and a roof made of corrugated steel, which makes it feel more like an aboveground bomb shelter than a house every time the torrential tropical rainfalls set in. You are asked to take a seat on an upturned bucket that is also used to catch the water that seeps out of the leak on the roof when it rains. On the floor, a few thin mats are strewn where women huddle with their children at night. If the women were lucky enough to pull together the money, you may see a one-burner portable gas stovetop for cooking, along with a small bag of rice or other non-perishable foodstuffs tucked into a corner of the apartment. In another part of the room, you see a large plastic bag with the few personal items one woman managed to grab before she fled her home in Honduras; another woman holds onto a small bottle of liquid medication to help break her baby's fever.

During my time in the field, I became very familiar with these rudimentary lodgings, where migrants spent long sedentary hours with their families or other companions. With barely a cent to spare, with nowhere to go and nothing to do, in an unfamiliar town where stories of discrimination, violence and crime toward migrants seem to surface daily, there were limited incentives for them to venture out. Even when migrants were free to come and go within their own living spaces, there was an onerous sense of entrapment. I stress that it was not always depressing; on the contrary, migrants become masters of small talk, indulging one another with

bawdy jokes or long discussions about their favorite foods back at home – anything to fill the time put on hold. In many cases, over time, migrants picked up part-time work, such as selling candy in the streets or (predominantly among men) hard labor in construction sites. However, such forms of work were hardly reliable and were consistently under strain by circumstances of extremely low pay, lack of childcare, exploitation, and employer abuse (e.g., employers refusing to pay, sexual affronts towards women). The longer that time expanded, the harder it was for many migrants to weather the conditions of their immobility and to maintain the hope, or merely the sheer endurance, to cope with the challenges of their surroundings.

Such is the case of Mariana and her husband Carlos, a young couple in their mid-twenties from El Salvador. The last time I saw them in Tapachula, they had been there for six months, waiting for refugee case resolution. After discussing a litany of problems that they had recently experienced – being denied half of her daily wages by an exploitative employer; insufficient humanitarian aid that pushed them to seek charity at a local church; the stress of managing her son's parasitic infection – Mariana went on to described worrisome changes that she had observed in her husband and herself, in their ways of being (*formas de ser*). She described physical changes, such as hair loss and insomnia, as well as emotional and psychological changes that left her feeling helpless (*desamparada*), including the need to be watchful of her husband's every move to make sure "he doesn't reach for a knife or take too many pills."

Although Tapachula may seem to have a robust institutional infrastructure for migrants, organizations are rarely able to meet the diverse needs of this in-between population awaiting refugee case resolution. This is a population whose needs go beyond immediate services of food and shelter provided by traditional reception sites, yet who have not had the time, opportunities, or incentives to generate the forms of capital (e.g., social, cultural, economic) necessary to

facilitate adjustment and resettlement within the city. Furthermore, I found that institutions sometimes, paradoxically, do more harm than good through the practices and logics that undergird their interventions. Beyond two or three local NGOs in Tapachula that truly embrace and demonstrate principles of social justice and migrant autonomy, I observed, first-hand, disturbing patterns of denied migrant agency, infantilization, gender-, sexuality-, and race/ethnicity-based discrimination, physical containment, and organizational ineptitude and inertia across both state and civil society institutions of migrant aid and assistance. Migrants quickly become attuned to institutional failures, often through a combination of personal experience, testimonies of fellow migrants, and rumors that circulated widely across migrant communities, including stories of violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation committed *within* institutions, as well as inadequate resources and personnel that result in disastrous outcomes (e.g., the Tapachula General Hospital was commonly referred to as the "*Hospital de la muerte*" ["Hospital of Death"]).

This is not to say that migrants did not find sources of support or ways to exercise agency and devise strategies for survival (something I address throughout the study), or that all institutional interventions resulted in pernicious outcomes for migrants. It is merely to alert readers to a much larger, systemic problem that we are seeing surface in various forms and in diverse contexts across the globe: emergent refugee regimes are charged with enormous responsibilities to protect and manage refugee populations without the resources or managerial capacity to deliver. Ultimately, it is the refugees seeking international protection who bear the burden of these systemic failures and whose resilience, although celebrated in a range of popular accounts, often comes at a very high price. I will expand on this throughout this work with a variety of concrete, comparative ethnographic evidence and associated analyses.

Research Sample and Methodology

During the course of my fieldwork, I met and spent time with migrants ranging from new arrivals to those who had been in Tapachula for ten or more years. However, my findings have been most profoundly informed by the lives and experiences of migrants who found themselves caught up in the "net" so to speak – a space which they themselves described as transitory, as neither their home nor their final destination. For some, this consisted of a period of three to four months in Tapachula while hoping for and awaiting refugee status. Others had been in Mexico for years. Some resided solely in Tapachula, caught in drawn out processes of contesting denied refugee case adjudication; still others had been all over Mexico or moved in a cyclical transnational pattern across two or more national borders, in what Frank-Vitale has described as being "stuck in motion" (2020). In such cases, individuals are compelled to engage in continuous mobility by the social and structural constraints of undocumented status (e.g., underground work, evasion of law enforcement) and drivers of displacement in their home communities (e.g., violence, unemployment).

During this stage of fieldwork, I primarily spent time with migrants who identified as heterosexual, cis-gender women, although I conducted some formal interviews and had countless informal conversations with men and LGBTQ+. Women's ages ranged from 14-64, with the majority between 20-40 years old. Their countries of origin predominantly included, but were not exclusive to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Though some traveled with husbands, partners, and friends, the overwhelming majority had fled their country alone or, in many cases, with one or two of their children. Women most commonly cited violence and the threat of violence by gangs and/or intimate partners as their primary motive for fleeing the country,

although this was often discussed in the context of other factors such as poverty, unemployment, legal vulnerability, and internal displacement.

Migrant shelters and other sites of migrant and refugee reception typically served as the initial point of access in my efforts to establish contact with study participants. I would often accompany and assist women in soliciting necessary resources and services in government agencies, such as COMAR, *Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM)* [National Migration Institute of Mexico], and public healthcare and social service institutions, as well as non-governmental organizations of migrant and refugee aid, such as the local ACNUR office or church-run centers. With time, my initial contact with interlocutors often turned into sustained social engagement, leading to substantial periods of time spent with women in private housing, work sites, public parks, and social events (e.g., dinners, celebrations, funerals). The main exception to this was engagement with interlocutors who were confined to institutional settings, including an NGO safe house for select refugee families in particularly vulnerable circumstances and a government-run women's shelter for victims of gender-based violence. In these cases, consistent contact was sustained through weekly site visits during which I carried out voluntary activities (e.g., art projects, English lessons), along with downtime for "hanging out" and more formal conversation.

I conducted in-depth interviews in Spanish and primarily during home visits or in private spaces within migrant shelters. Interviews spanned 30 minutes to 1.5 hours and were recorded with a digital recorder. My research assistant, Cristóbal, accompanied me throughout the majority of my work in the field. However, because of his male gender and the sensitive nature of interview questions, he rarely participated in the interviews with women. That said, although I initially hired Cristóbal for logistical and safety purposes, he became an invaluable asset to the

project. As a long-term migration researcher and activist from Mexico who had worked in the region for upwards of ten years, he was a wealth of knowledge about migration- and refugee-related policies and procedures, and he was able to share invaluable information with migrants about how to navigate the system in order to access critical resources and services. Also, because of his extensive experience working with Central Americans, he often served as a sort of cultural broker, helping to bridge cultural and linguistic divides that I sometimes confronted. Both aspects of his involvement contributed to the critical process of establishing rapport with women and their families, and gaining their trust.

In addition to my time in Tapachula, I spent approximately six non-consecutive weeks of research during two separate migrant caravans carried out respectively in April 2017 and April-May 2018. My participation in the caravan began at the onset of the journey in Ciudad Hidalgo at the southern Mexico border, followed by continuous trekking for more than a week at a time throughout southern Mexico. During this time, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with thirty-five Central American caravan participants (henceforth referred to as *caravaneros)* across various axes of social diversity, and with another eleven professional informants, primarily caravan coordinators and volunteers. This included a special focus on the group of LGBTQ+ *caravaneros*, with whom I became particularly involved during my time in Tijuana following the arrival of the 2018 caravan. As a human rights observer in both caravans, I was able to use a variety of access points in addition to formal interviews, including informally speaking with *caravaneros*, participant-observation through deep ethnographic immersion (such as sleeping in parks, playing with children, cooking with and marching alongside caravan participants), and close observation of organizing activities and discursive frameworks.

This also involved a four-week period of data collection and advocacy work along the US-Mexico border in Tijuana, in May 2018, following the arrival of the caravan. During this time, I volunteered with a prominent migrant advocacy and refugee rights organization to help prepare and organize *caravaneros* who wished to file claims for asylum in the United States, such as through know-your-rights workshops and logistical support (e.g., temporary housing, migrant accompaniment in institutional settings). I was also involved in efforts to denounce and resist unlawful actions taken by US migration agents to deter asylum seekers from making asylum claims. To this end, I helped collect information from asylum-seekers turned away by agents at the US border, which eventually resulted in a lawsuit against US Border Patrol filed by the *Al Otro Lado* legal advocacy group for migrant and refugee rights. I also participated as a Human Rights Observer in a weeklong sit-in at the San Isidro Port of Entry at the San Diego/Tijuana border.

At the onset of my project, I had not anticipated doing fieldwork in the caravan; in fact, prior to beginning my project I had intentionally decided *not* to carry out multi-sited research because that I thought it would be too much to take on for an exploratory, ethnographic study (compared to, for instance, a more systematic, narrowly defined methodological approach). Furthermore, I agreed with Vogt's perspective that an in-depth understanding of transit migration does not necessarily require the researcher to "be constantly on the move" (Vogt 2018: 13). Indeed, as my sustained work in Tapachula taught me, staying put in sites along borders and transit zones is crucial to generating insights into the role of *immobility* and *stasis* in structuring migrant trajectories and outcomes, something I realized is completely overlooked by studies that predominantly focus on "following the people" (Marcus 1995).

That said, a number of recent studies on Central American transit migration have demonstrated the methodological and analytic utility of multi-sited research. I found that the experience-near approach of caravan participation unveiled unique insights into critical dimensions of collective journeying – insights, I assert, which could not be fully grasped without immersion into the quotidian, embodied practices of *mobility in-situ*. Paired with prolonged research on the southern border, I was able to gain a comprehensive perspective of the distinct yet interconnected spaces of transit that constitute migrant trajectories across Mexico. Through this approach I have come to realize that the journey is just as much an experiential phenomenon as one defined by physical movement.

Conducting research during the migrant caravans also broadened the study's scope on the role of gender and sexuality in shaping experiences of transit migration. Originally, I had planned on focusing primarily on the lived experiences of migrant women and their families. However, during the caravan of 2018, and the subsequent fieldwork in Tijuana that directly followed the arrival of the 2018 caravan, I ended up getting to know and spending extensive time with a group of LGBTQ+ Central American migrants. This group of around twenty LGBTQ+ individuals formed their own, independent caravan, which they called *Diversidad sin Fronteras* (DSF) [Diversity without Borders]. For logistical and safety purposes, DSF joined the broader caravan movement partway through the trek. However, they always maintained their own unique collective identity and objectives distinct from the larger caravan.

Initially, I spent time with DSF through formal organizing and advocacy efforts in Tijuana. However, as I grew closer to DSF members, my time with them quickly expanded to incorporate informal activities, including hanging out at the beach, restaurants, and cafes, and other forms of support following adverse events. For example, I accompanied one *trans chica*s

(transgender woman) to the Emergency Unit after she was physically attacked in Tijuana and then, following the attack, helped the group get settled into a safe house that was arranged by a US-based LGBTQ rights organization to help provide increased safety and protection for DSW members.

My prolonged engagement with this group of young *caravaneros* raised new, important questions for me about the struggles and resiliency of LGBTQ migrant youth. The repeated acts of victimization, targeted policing, and institutional exclusion directed towards DSF youth, which I witnessed and helped them to address during my short time with them in Tijuana, shed new light on the profound impact of the multiple, compounding vulnerabilities that these young people experience in the course of transit migration. It also underscored the important significance and power of their activist efforts, which I continued to see grow and evolve during ongoing correspondence with many of the DSF youth following their arrival in the United States.

A Note on Terminology

Throughout this work, I refer primarily to my interlocutors and their communities as "migrants" or, alternatively, by the individual's specific country of origin and identified gender (e.g., Guatemalan man, woman from Honduras). "Migrant," as opposed to "immigrant" or "emigrant," lacks indication of directionality, as well as temporal and spatial fixity. Furthermore, "migrant" [*migrante*] was the term most frequently used by my interlocutors to describe themselves and their communities (in the case of migrant participants) or their affiliates (in the case of migrant rights advocates).

I intentionally use terms like "refugee," "refugee applicant" and "asylum seeker" much more sparingly and primarily as a way to describe interlocutors who were currently in the process of applying for refugee status (in Mexico) or asylum (in the United States), or who self-

identified as such during the time of our engagement. When possible, I try to avoid refugee-related labels all together and, instead, denote the status of one's refugee application (e.g., in process, rejected, contested), as a way to emphasize "refugee" as the product of a legal and bureaucratic procedure, rather than an identity with a broad range of contested meanings and connotations.

There is substantial debate across academic, humanitarian, and political spheres about the use of the categories of "migrant" and "refugee." International organizations, such as UNHCR, International Rescue Committee, and International Organization for Migration, to name a few, tend to defend the use of the two categories as a way to differentiate between the drivers, intentions, and purported legal rights of the two categories of people: "We say '**refugees**' when we mean people fleeing war **or** persecution across an international border. And we say '**migrants**' when we mean people moving for reasons not included in the legal definition of a **refugee"** (UNHCR 2016: original emphasis). However, others argue that such categories promote a false dichotomy that does not accurately reflect the lived realities of people on the move, and which tends to be harnessed for political purposes to exclude, discriminate, or privilege certain groups over others (for a comprehensive overview of this debate see: Crawley and Skleparis 2018). My stance aligns with scholars who problematize the categorization of displaced people as both an inaccurate representation of the diversity, unpredictability, and evolving nature of migrant mobility (Koser and Martin 2011; Collyer and Haas 2012; Mainwaring and Brigden 2016), as well as an epistemological tool that is often used to shape interpretations of social reality towards broader political or social aims (e.g., connoting notions of deservingness vs. social threat) (Zetter 2007; Scherschel 2011; Long 2013).

It is also important to highlight the terminology that I use in Chapter Five, which focuses primarily on a group of transgender women who participated in the 2018 DSF migrant caravan. Henceforth, I refer to these young women as "*chicas trans,*" which is how they both collectively self-identified and became widely known by fellow *caravaneros*. I employ "LGBTQ+" to refer to interlocutors who identified as such, as well as when referencing the general, overarching category of gender- and sexual-minority migrants.

The majority of my interlocutors in the DSF caravan were between sixteen and twenty-four years old, although some were as young as twelve and others in their early thirties. In deciding not to define "youth" by a certain age group, I do not intend to overlook the diversity of experiences and needs of young people across different ages and life experiences. I recognize, for example, that a twelve-year-old transgender homeless youth may have a very different outlook on life and distinct challenges compared to a twenty-five-year-old cis-gender woman in college. However, as a long lineage of anthropological studies on youth cultures have shown, understandings of "youth," as a social category, vary widely across historical, cultural, and political contexts and cannot be relegated to strictly age-bound criteria (Mead 2001; Amit and Wulff 1995; Sharp 2002). I apply the category of youth in accordance with the self-perceptions of *chicas trans* and their affiliates, who have described the use of *"chicas"* (girls) instead of *"mujeres"* (women) as both a term of endearment and a reflection of their youthfulness and youthful lifestyle *("de la vida chavita").*

Throughout this study, pseudonyms and basic demographic data are used to describe my interlocutors. The only exception to this is in the case of key community stakeholders (e.g., migrant rights activists, humanitarian workers, health care professionals) in Mexico and the United States, who specifically requested to be identified by their personal name and/or the name

of their organization for explicit acknowledgment. I refer to all others by a generic title in order to uphold their privacy and anonymity.

Data Analysis

This study generated the following types of data: real-time jottings in the field, systematic ethnographic field notes, in-depth interview recordings and transcripts, analytic memos, reflective journaling, and notes and photocopies of relevant archival materials. I analyzed data in an ongoing, iterative process throughout and following data collection. After each interview and period of participant-observation, I recorded systematic, exploratory analytic memos, which included thoughts about emerging concepts, potential themes, contradictory or surprising events, and how the data relates to relevant categories that I had identified in extant theory (Gibson & Brown 2009). This allowed me to home in on key conceptual domains that I then compared across field data and to continuously revise research questions in light of new findings. The memos eventually became more systematic, theoretical and insightful over time and served as building blocks for the final written analysis (Corbin and Strauss 2007).

I applied two stages of coding to data in order to identify underlying patterns and overarching themes. First, I used open coding, or a close, line-by-line approach to preliminary analysis with some predetermined categories and themes in mind, based on previous training and research interests. This was followed by focused coding – fine-grained, line-by-line analysis on the basis of topics that have emerged from the data and are identified as being of particular interest (Schensul and LeCompte 2012; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). The two stages were not distinct, but rather encompassed within a cyclic and iterative process that went back and forth between the two.

Since completing fieldwork in 2018, my research has resulted in first-authored

publications of earlier versions of two of the chapters presented in this monograph. The first publication (based on Chapter Three), entitled, "Affective Dimensions of Waiting: Experiences of Central American Migrants Immobilized on the Southern Mexico Border," was an invited chapter in an academic edition, *Gusts of Wind from the Global South: Recent Mobilities in Border Zones of South and Southeastern Mexico States* (Wurtz 2018), published by the Southern Border College of Chiapas (ECOSUR) and edited by Luis Alfredo Arriola Vega and Enrique Coraza de los Santos. A second article (based on Chapter Four), entitled "A Movement in Motion: Collective Mobility and Embodied Practice in the Viacrucis Migrant Caravan" (Wurtz 2020) was published by *Mobilities*, an international journal that publishes original, theoretically informed research on human mobility and mobility rights. In addition, I have also presented dissertation research findings at several academic conferences and research symposiums in the United States, Mexico, and Honduras, including a research seminar and photo-ethnography exhibition that I co-organized in collaboration with the Museum of Anthropology and History in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. I also wrote brief news articles for widespread public dissemination, which were posted on the websites of the *Social Science Research Council* and *Cultural Anthropology*.

Ethics

Research for this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Columbia University (IRB-AAAP5450) and by the Institute of Graduate Studies at *El Colegio de la Frontera Sur* (ECOSUR) in Tapachula, Mexico, under the tutelage of Dr. Enrique Corazo de los Santos. As a vulnerable population contending with violence, poverty, exploitation, and displacement, the study population required special ethical considerations, particularly in terms of confidentiality, research transparency, and access to community resources. I made every

attempt possible to maintain confidentiality and protection of research participants through strict adherence to the research protocol and ethical guidelines (American Anthropological Association 2012; Health and Human Subjects (HHS) 1979). I also continuously endeavored to minimize power differentials by building rapport with research participants and spending extensive time with them in daily activities prior to conducting formal interviews; by employing a semi-structured interview approach that facilitates a conversation-like flow and recognizes the expertise of the research participant; through consistent, open dialogue and consultation with community stakeholders; and through ongoing reflection on my how my positionality (as a white, middle-class, American woman) might affect research relationships and findings. In addition, I attempted to give back to the migrant community through regular volunteer work at a migrant shelter and other sites of migrant aid. I have, thus far, disseminated research findings to the communities of study, academic audiences, and within broad public and professional arenas, including participation in bi-national networks of border research and collaboration.

The Structure of the Monograph

The monograph is organized into five chapters:

In Chapter One, I present an overview of the historical and political context of Central American migration, including shifting demographic and policy trends that have occurred over time. Then, drawing on a combination of the extant literature and original ethnographic data, I lay out my conceptual armature. I discuss predominant unifying themes across chapters including existential and subjective experiences of im/mobility; the role of gender and sexual orientation; the paradoxes of institutional measures to provide refugee support and aid; and individual and collective forms of resilience that are shaped through collective mobilization.

In Chapter Two, "The 'Paradox' of Protection: Refugee Management and Gender-based Violence in the Southern Mexico Borderlands," I contribute to understandings of how social assumptions about mobility intersect with normative gender regimes to shape women refugees' opportunities and outcomes. I achieve this by considering government and civil-society responses to gender-based violence in order to demonstrate how women's migrant trajectories and access to mobility are affected by the broader policy climate (including, but not exclusive to refugee policy). I argue that this approach has rarely been used in mobilities scholarship, even though in other fields it has been shown to reveal considerable insight in ways that would not be captured by focusing on a single policy domain alone (Zickgraf 2019). I argue that gender mobility biases underlie institutional logic and compound other forms of gendered institutional inequality, and that those often serve to reproduce, rather than mitigate, root causes of gender-based violence. This occurs primarily through measures that restrict reproductive autonomy and spatial regulations that limit women's access to safe and unhindered mobility.

Chapter Three, "Waiting out the Crisis," advances scholarship on the relationships of waiting, immobility, and gender (Colon 2011; Bissell 2007) by attending to the affective dimensions of women's experiences of waiting for refugee status in a context of profound uncertainty (e.g., boredom, fear and anxiety, loss of autonomy). Affect provides an important lens through which to analyze experiences of waiting by linking intimate, subjective accounts to broader relations of power. Throughout this chapter I analyze how gender-specific frameworks related to violence, motherhood, and religion undergird women's understandings of imposed periods of stasis in the context of international migration, as well as the strategies and diverse modes of mobility that women engage to advance their respective trajectories.

Binary tropes of "good"/immobile refugees versus "threatening"/mobile others, alongside gendered associations of feminized patience versus masculine action, have been widely discussed in the literature. My analysis presents empirical, experience-near evidence that problematizes such dichotomies, showing how they are not upheld in practice, and why, therefore, they continue to be perpetuated in the social imaginary. I achieve this through a close look at the heterogeneity of women's responses to forced immobility, as well as the gender-specific motives that drive their decisions to engage mobility or stasis within the given circumstances. It also shows how immobility can be active, agentive process, and not simply defined by inaction or acquiescence.

Chapter Four, "A Movement in Motion: Collective mobility and embodied practice in the Viacrucis Migrant Caravan," provides critical intervention into theories of (im)mobility, collective action, and resilience. Other than the few studies aforementioned, limited research has interrogated *collective* migrant responses to resist the conditions of forced immobilization and state containment. Furthermore, research on migrant collective action often emphasizes political subjectivity and organizing, foreclosing alternative interpretations, such as those that take into account historical and religious frameworks. In this chapter, drawing on pilgrimage literature and theories of liberation psychology (Martin-Baro 1995), I argue that attentiveness to shifts in bodily practices and sensations of caravan participants, including a sense of time and space, engenders novel insight into the generative and productive potential of collective journeying. It sheds light on how participation in the caravan may serve as a powerful source of coping and resilience, alongside, as well as in the absence of, political aims and political consciousness.

Finally, in Chapter Five, "Rewriting Mobility Imaginaries," I draw on the involvement of LGBTQ Central American migrant youth in the 2017 and 2018 *Diversidad Sin Fronteras (DSF)*

[Diversity without Borders] LGBTQ migrant caravan movement. I argue that through their pursuit for both social belonging and survival in *el camino*, they forge new pathways of understanding and engaging shifting notions of self, kinship, intimacy and care, and, in turn, their own capacity for political struggle. One of the primary means through which youth attempt to resist and reconfigure the terms of their migration is through building presence and recognition in virtual and visual landscapes, such as through the use of digital media and technology (e.g., Internet social media, photography, video). Through critical attention to how youth discuss and harness cultural practices of digital media, I show that youth not only engage in sophisticated rights-based discourse, but also are actively constructing imaginaries of an alternative future, revealing the potency of hope, future-making, and self-representation as political practice.

In this Introduction, I have provided an overview of my study site, sample, and methodological approach. This has set the stage for the ethnographic portrait that unfolds in the following chapters of the monograph and has alerted readers to the broader implications of my findings. As I will discuss in further detail in the next chapter, Central American migration to Mexico and the United States has had a long and turbulent history and, today, has reached a new height of activity in light of escalating conditions of violence and displacement. It is critical, now more than ever, to explore the lived experiences of transit migration and the multiple im/mobilities that shape people's lives, opportunities, and imagined futures.

Chapter One

THEORIZING IM/MOBILITY AND MIGRATION IN AN AGE OF PRECARITY

The early 2000's heralded a "new mobilities" research paradigm (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2002) involving scholars intent on expanding long-established work on migration (Richards 1939; Epstein 1958; Colson 1971; 1999; L. Malkki 1995) to address diverse forms and meanings of mobility in contemporary societies. Alongside a growing literature on transportation and tourism (Creswell 2006; Lindquist 2009) within the field of urban studies, and phenomenological interpretations of physical, bodily movement (Seamon 2013; Csordas 1994), anthropological studies on migration have been central to advancing understandings of (im)mobility in ways that have brought it to the heart of this body of social theory (Salazar and Smart 2011). As seen in a wide range of anthropological literature (Nash 1993; Ong 1999; Carling 2002; Gutekunst, et al. 2016) when used as a theoretical lens, (im)mobility exposes critical links between core anthropological concepts such as liminality, existentiality, intimacy, and resilience, on the one hand, and, on the other, large-scale processes associated with movement and flows – globalization, transmigration, war, and state control. As this reveals, im/mobility is both an intimate, embodied event, as well as a modality of modern power.

In this chapter, I offer a conceptual roadmap of the theoretical issues and questions that drive this study. By laying out current theoretical approaches to human (im)mobility and underexplored dimensions of this phenomenon, I demonstrate the unique theoretical contribution of my analysis and what is at stake in this work. I begin with a detailed overview of the historical and political context of Central American migration in order to provide the necessary background to appreciate the key conceptual domains that drive my analysis. I then discuss

shifting trends within migration and mobility scholarship, with particular attention to theoretical advances and gaps of knowledge within the phenomenon of "transit migration." Finally, I guide readers through the conceptual armature of my analysis, detailing predominant themes that cut across the following four dissertation chapters.

Historical and Political Context of Central American Migration

Human mobility has long been considered by scholars to be a fundamental characteristic of the human condition (McNeill 1984; Salazar 2017). However, following WWII in the mid-20th century, with the rise of the contemporary global system of nation-state governance, human movement became a primary target of tightened regulation and control (Messina 2007; Council on Foreign Relations 2021). Of special significance is the emergence of major shifts in world politics and a global, capitalist economy that compelled or forced people to leave their home countries or territories to seek out new means of survival and prosperity. This includes factors such as war and genocide (notably, against indigenous peoples); poverty and unemployment; increased labor demands and taxation; the undermining of rural subsistence economies and the alienation of land from the poor and subsequent turn to urban migration; and far-reaching consequences of human-instigated environmental degradation and natural disasters.

Much of the early anthropological work on forced migration was advanced by Africanist scholars who focused on Central Africa in the 1930s – 1950s (Richards 1939; Epstein 1958; Powdermaker 1962; Colson 1971). This work was driven by a deep concern for the devastating effects of colonial power and inequalities. Later scholarship that emerged on Latin America, following World War II, was particularly inspired by Marxist approaches and concern with the effects of American interference in foreign economies and the undermining of peasant

economies and communities (R. Redfield 1942; Mintz 1960; Wolf 1982). The critical, power-oriented perspectives of these scholars, which emphasized historical and contemporary processes of uneven power relations and inequalities within society, set the stage for a specialized school of thought on migration and exploitation in the Americas. Scholars such as James Quesada (Quesada 1998; 1999), Linda Green (L. B. Green 1999), Josiah Heyman (Heyman 2016), and Barbara Coutin (Coutin 1998; Coutin 1993) have played key roles in advancing our understanding of the human and social impact of evolving US-Latin American relations in the 20th century and beyond, and have paved the way for the kind of work being carried out today. Now, with these issues in mind, I turn to an in-depth look at the historical context of Central American migration, which provides a critical lens for the questions driving my study.

Migration in the 20th Century: US Bracero Program and the "Dirty Wars" of Central America

In the context of the Western Hemisphere, transnational migration patterns have been most forcefully driven by US-based foreign policies and interests in Latin America and the Caribbean. In 1942, in response to war-time labor shortages in agriculture, millions of Mexican guest workers were brought to the United States (esp. Texas and California) on temporary labor contracts as part of the *Bracero* [Farm Laborer] Program. Twenty-two years later, in 1964, when the program finally came to an end, durable cross-border practices of documented and undocumented labor, including cheap labor demands by US industry and remittances sent back to Mexico, had become well-established patterns in US and Mexican society. As Massey and Ling explain, "Rather than bringing Mexican migration to a halt…the demise of the Bracero program simply re-directed it," resulting in a sustained increased in undocumented migration from Mexico through 1979 (Massey and Liang 1989).

Compared to migration patterns from Mexico, US-bound Central American migration emerged later on, primarily in the 1980's, as a result of massive economic devastation and political upheaval (commonly referred to as the "dirty wars") in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. It has been estimated that between 1974-1996, over one million people from these three countries died from genocide and war-related violence and nearly three million fled their homes to seek safe haven in neighboring and northern countries (especially Mexico, United States, and Canada). The US government played a key role in the escalating violence in Central American countries through a long history of economic exploitation of the region (as exemplified by the United Fruit Company) and through direct financial and military support, including billions of dollars, equipment, arms, and military training for corrupt dictatorships and right-wing terrorists groups (Green 2009). This includes US-backed support for the Contra death squads in Nicaragua (which continued even after US support of the Contras was publicly banned by Congress) and the Guatemalan President (1982-1983), General Efraín Ríos Montt, who was later convicted in Guatemala of genocide of an estimated 75,000 Mayan peoples (Burt and Estrada 2018). At the time, and the height of Cold War politics, US support and interventions were justified as measures to resist the threat of Communism, such as support for the Nicaraguan Contras to extinguish the leftist *Sandinista* party (Quesada 1999).

Despite years of heavy-handed, self-serving interventions in political and economic processes within Central America, US administrations under Ronald Reagan and George Bush, Sr. consistently refused to be held accountable for the US's role in creating the resultant refugee crisis in Central America. They instead preferred to focus on the value of regional trade deals, the free movement of capital, and the necessity of countering leftist political movement (Quesada 1999). Furthermore, government leaders actively and inadvertently opposed refugee protection

through domestic policies, such as the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which imposed a number of sanctions to control the entry of undocumented migrants, and through external pressure on Mexico to deter northbound mobility (Bean, Vernez, and Keely 1989; Garcia 2006).

This final point warrants careful consideration, given the current context of Central American migration, as it sets an important precedent for the influence of the US over Mexican and Central American migration and refugee policies. Although during the era of the dirty wars, the Mexican state collaborated with UNHCR to create refugee camps for nearly 50,000 mostly Maya refugees, the vast majority of Central American migrants seeking international protection received zero recognition or assistance by the Mexico government. As early as 1980, Mexico justified this by claiming that Central America migrants were simply passing through Mexico *in transit* to the United States, even though this was not necessarily the case. In fact, it was actually the conditions created by Mexican state neglect and absence of assistance, rather than established patterns of familial migration or other more traditional motives of immigration, which then propelled Central Americans to continue the journey north. This then resulted in increased political pressure imposed by the US on Mexico to curtail heavy flows of migrants arriving at the southern US border (Bean, Vernez, and Keely 1989; Garcia 2006). As Garcia (Garcia 2006) explains:

> As a result [of the influx of Central American refugees seeking US asylum], by the late 1980s the United States actively pressured Mexico to do more to control its southern border and step up its deportation of Central American workers, and in the NAFTA era Mexico was willing to comply. Once again, Central Americans became the pawns of foreign policy decisions.

As I will touch on in a subsequent section, we see such tactics consistently repeated and sustained by US political interventions throughout the early 2000s, including the US's extensive

involvement in Mexico's 2014 Southern Border Plan *[Plan Frontera Sur]*, as well as recent threats made by the Trump administration to withdraw financial support to Mexico if its government did not enforce harsher measures to intercept and dissipate US-bound Central American migrant caravans.

New Waves and Shifting Demographics within Central American Migration in the 2000's

Following the dirty wars of the 1970s and 1980s, Central American migration to the United States continued to increase (especially from Honduras), although the primary drivers and incentives of migration had shifted significantly. Civil war and state repression were replaced by uneven economic development, endemic poverty, and devastation of local subsidence farming practices, which led to the wide-scale displacement of rural communities and a rush of international and internal migration to urban centers of industry. Growing social networks and employment demands in the US were additional factors (Blanchard et al. 2011), along with massive destruction caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, which spurred additional spikes in Honduran migration.

Many of the economic drivers of Central American migration in the 1990's were directly related to US-instigated policies of neoliberal restructuring, particularly the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) initiated during the Clinton Administration in 1994. NAFTA ushered in a new era of transnational commerce and trade in the Americas. However, while border zones were made more porous to accommodate the movement of industry and commercial goods, regulation over human movement became increasingly narrow, along with heightened levels of risk for those attempting unauthorized border crossings. Operation Gatekeeper (1994), authorized $50 million to construct a fourteen-mile security fence along the US-Mexico border, in addition to doubling the amount of Border Patrol agents, compelling

migrants to undertake unauthorized border crossings set along the treacherous terrain of the Sonoran dessert. Such policy measures have been associated with the death of over 5,000 migrants since 1994 (DeLeon 2015). Just two years later, in 1996, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act was passed, significantly expanded the grounds for non-citizens deportation[2].

Newly arrived Central American migrants were particularly hard-hit by this law, as many of them represented demographic groups that put them at increased risk for deportation: mostly young, independent, single men and women seeking economic opportunities. Consequently, rates of deportation of Central American migrants skyrocketed during this period, from less than 5,000 people *total* from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras between 1975-1995, to 160,000 border crossers and 5,000 US prisoners from these countries over the following decade (UNODC 2007).

The mass deportation by the US of Central Americans in the early 2000s included a substantial representation of young, single males who had been involved in Los Angeles gangs and who then turned to similar practices of gang activity and organization upon return to their estranged countries of origin. As Rogers and Bard note: "Arriving in countries of origin that they barely knew, deportees rapidly reproduced the structures and behavior patterns that had provided them with support and security in the United States, including in particular founding local *clikas*, or chapters, of the *Dieciocho* and *Salvatrucha* gangs" (Rogers and Bard 2015). Substantial scholarship has shown that mass deportation and the subsequent exporting of US gang culture to Central American communities has played a key role in the exponential growth of extreme and widespread violence in Central American countries since the late 1990's (Cruz 2010; Zilberg 2011; Perez 2014). However, the rise in gang violence is complex and multi-faceted, also involving socio-economic conditions (e.g., joblessness, poverty), processes of urban

development, and, most importantly, transnational security agreements. For example, it is widely acknowledged that repressive state measures to contain gang activity in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, directly fueled the subsequent magnitude and intensity of gang violence and crime. Such anti-gang, zero-tolerance policies, commonly referred to as "Mano Dura" [Hard Hand] policies in Central America, were premised on law enforcement measures of extreme brutality, military intervention, and mass incarceration of actual and suspected gang members. These interventions were buffered and supported by US War on Drugs policy agendas. However, rather than stifle gang violence, this, ironically, resulted in increased power, technological sophistication, and professionalization of gangs, including organized forms of transnational criminality (Sullivan 2010; Cruz 2010; Zilberg 2011).

As a result of escalating and unbridled violence, since 2014, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have consistently been ranked among the world's top ten deadliest countries; in 2014, Honduras had the highest homicide rate in the world, which was replaced by El Salvador in 2020. This has had a drastic impact on flows and demographic shifts within Central American migration, marking a new era of forced mobility in the Americas. Between 2011 and 2014, the number of Central American migrants moving northward more than tripled, as people fled their homes in response to extortion, forced gang recruitment, homicides of family members, death threats, rape and forced prostitution, and intra-familial violence – trends that have continued to the present. The nature and severity of the situation in Central America has also altered the demographic composition of the Central American migrant population since the early 2000's, evidenced by a substantial increase in women, family groups, unaccompanied minors, and LGBTQ populations traversing the southern Mexico border (Isacson and Meyer 2014; UNHCR 2021).

In addition to overall homicide rates, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala are also ranked among the top ten countries in the global index of gender-based homicides of women (Geneva Declaration 2015). Domestic violence has become a primary driver among women fleeing Central America[3]. Furthermore, gang members often target women and girls for forced prostitution and other forms of sexual violence; along with young men, women may also be forced by gangs to sell or run drugs or they may have become fully recruited into criminal organizations (UNHCR 2021).

Such forms of violence and exploitation not only affect the targeted individual, but also take a heavy toll on the entire household. For example, gang retaliation for failure to comply with gang demands or other perceived offenses often includes attacks on other kin and can affect their access to important resources in key areas of education, employment, and healthcare. In a recent study by UNHCR (2021) involving 636 interviews with Central American family units in transit through Mexico, 68% of families interviewed had experienced difficulties in securing employment in their communities of origin and only 54% of children had been in school prior to their departure. Although families frequently attempt to relocate within their home country (a form of internal displacement), the extensive reach of gang networks has made that a less and less viable alternative. In my own research, I spoke with numerous women with children who had spent months moving from one "safe" site to the next, only to find themselves ultimately doing what they had hope to avoid: fleeing beyond their own country's borders and into Mexico.

Such shifts in practices of violence, from targeting individuals to entire families, have become increasingly evident in recent years in a dramatic spike in migration of family units. According to US Customs and Border Protection, between October 2019 and July 2019, the number of apprehended families increased from 77,800 in 2018 to over 432,000 in 2019 (a 456%

increase) (UNCHR 2021). New opportunities and strategies for migration may also contribute to family mobility, as more and more families are opting to travel in small groups or with northbound caravans (ibid).

There is also some evidence of increased rates of migration and refugee applications submitted by LGBTQ+ individuals from Central America (Winton 2019; COMAR/SEGOB 2019). Although there is a dearth of accurate data on violence committed against LGBTQ people in Central American countries, NGO reports across the region have documented widespread, pervasive persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals and communities due to sexual orientation and gender identity, including threats, physical attacks, sexual violence, homicide, and legal impunity. In a UNHCR (UNHCR 2017) study among LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, 88% of people interviewed reported suffering sexual- and gender-based violence in their countries of origin. As the nature of violence has shifted within Central American societies, alongside prolonged political inertia and ongoing legal impunity towards perpetrators and systems of violence, so too, has the demographic profile of migrants fleeing for their lives.

US Response and Interventions to "Stem the Tide" of Northbound Mobility (2014-present)

In 2014, the situation in Central America came to a head in US policy debates with the arrival of an unprecedented number of Central American children and families at its southern border. President Barack Obama described the event as an "urgent humanitarian situation" (Zezima and O'Keefe 2015), and initially his administration moved quickly to find ways to address the "border crisis," including expanded family detention measures, immediate increases in expedited removal and deportation processes of unauthorized migrants, and aggressive raids on "undocumented" Central American families (President Obama would eventually deport more migrants than any of his predecessors) (Musalo and Lee 2017). Furthermore, in contrast to

initiatives in the 1990's that primarily centered on the militarization of the US-Mexico border, additional measures were taken in the 2000's to pressure Mexico and Central American countries to prevent and interdict northbound migratory flows – a political approach that has become commonly discussed as the internationalization or externalization of migration policies (Düvell 2012; McKeever and Miller 2004). For example, in 2014, Ambassador Tom Shannon, the special counselor to the Secretary of State, relayed to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that a key strategy to address the arrival of unaccompanied minors included "improving the ability of Mexico and Guatemala to interdict migrants before they cross into Mexico and enter the established smuggling routes that move the migrants to our border" (Meyer and Boggs 2016).

In response to heightened pressure from the US to curb Central American migration, the Mexican government began to enforce intensified measures of securitization and migration control as part of Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto's Southern Border Plan (*El Plan de Frontera Sur)*. This included aggressive measures of "border fortification" along the Mexico-Guatemala border and throughout the state of Chiapas, including internal checkpoints, immigration raids, and police surveillance of cargo trains (once a primary mode of transportation for migrants in transit). Many of these interventions were made possible by millions of dollars of US support in weaponry, military training, and high-tech equipment (Isacson and Meyer 2014). As a result, the number of US apprehensions of minors and family units declined by nearly 50%, while rates of Mexico deportation of Central American migrants rose from 78,733 in 2013 to 105,303 in 2014 (ibid). In 2011, total apprehensions of Central American nationals by the United States and Mexico equaled 102,204; by the end of 2015, that number had risen nearly threefold to 301,075 (Chishti and Hipsman 2016).

Consequently, Central American migrants faced radical disruptions in well-established migratory routes: dangerous transportation by train has become increasingly difficult and alternative walking routes were besieged by gang violence, while the financial and human costs associated with human smuggling continued to rise (Isacson and Meyer 2014; DeLeon 2015). Mounting disappearances and deaths of migrants in South and Central Mexico culminated in what was referred to in the mid-2000s as a "humanitarian crisis" (Isacson & Meyer 2014). This raised growing criticisms among international human rights organizations of Mexico's new role as the US's "immigration enforcer"[4] and violations of *non-refoulement*[5] laws, along with increased international pressure on Mexico to improve measures of refugee assistance (Human Rights First 2017; Amnesty International 2018). In response, the Mexican government made efforts to improve access to asylum, including the development of a rapidly evolving institutional landscape aimed at refugee surveillance, documentation, and humanitarian aid. Indeed, between 2014-2016, the number of petitions for asylum quadrupled (a tenfold increase since 2011), from 2,137 applications in 2014 to 8,796 in 2016[6]; by the end of 2019, the number of people seeking international protection in Mexico reached 66,915: an eightfold increase over just three years (Meyer 2019).

However, it is important to note that despite the spike in asylum petitions, the number of people whose cases were ultimately granted refugee status remains low. For example, in 2017, 14,596 people applied for asylum. Over half of those cases (7,719) remain unresolved, 2,233 cases were abandoned; and 167 were withdrawn. In sum, only 4,475 of all original applicants, or 30.7 percent, concluded their proceedings (Human Rights First 2018). This has been attributed to long processing delays in the refugee protection system, which continues to be highly under-resourced and under-staffed and has been criticized for its incapacity to provide meaningful

protection for current and prospective asylum seekers. Indeed, in 2018, the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH [National Human Rights Committee of Mexico] 2018) (CNDH) in Mexico issued an urgent call to the federal government in which they described such delays as constituting a denial of international protection and in which they warn of a "possible collapse" of the refugee system due to significant shortfalls of effective operative capacity.

Since the CNDH memorandum was issued in 2018, conditions of refugee protection in Mexico have only continued to decline due to key changes in immigrant policy and border enforcement across the region. On January 25th, 2019, the Trump administration implemented the "Migration Protection Protocols" (MPP) (commonly referred to as "Remain in Mexico"), forcing thousands of asylum seekers, including over 10,000 unaccompanied children, to reside along the US-Mexico border while awaiting a hearing on their claims. Since that time, Human Rights First has documented over 1,300 cases of rape, kidnapping, and assault among those awaiting asylum (Davis 2020). Later that year, in September 2019, the US passed another regulation that barred asylum seekers from submitting an asylum claim to the US if they passed through a third country on their way to the US and did not submit a claim for asylum in said country of transit. This regulation was expanded through bilateral agreements (known as the "Asylum Cooperation Agreements") signed between the US and Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, which allow US agents to remove asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border and transfer them to the corresponding country where they were expected to first submit a request for asylum (Council on Foreign Relations 2021).

In 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic gave way to even more extreme measures of immigration restriction based on an order issued by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. According to this order (under sanctions 362 and 363 of the Public Health

Service Act, Title 42 of the US Code) authorized US officials are allowed to deny entry to the US to foreign individuals for an indeterminate time until "the danger of further introduction of COVID-19 into the United States has ceased to be a serious danger to the public health" (CDC 2020: 3). Between March and November 2020, this resulted in the expulsion of more than 328,000 people from the US, including at least 13,000 unaccompanied children – many of whom received no screenings for international protection needs or claims for family reunification (UNHCR 2021).

Although these policies were developed and driven under the Trump administration, critics also call attention to the role that the Mexican government has played in allowing restrictive enforcement measures to operate effectively. Mexico's President Lopez Obrador ("AMLO"), who took office in 2018, initially promoted a human rights approach to migration policies, including tackling root causes of migration and developing job opportunities to Central American migrants (Arriola Vega 2019). However, under looming threats by the US to impose tariffs on Mexican goods, AMLO's administration began "to do the dirty work it vowed to avoid" (Lin 2019), including the deployment of the National Guard to the southern Mexico border, as well as widespread impunity by Mexican officials towards those who victimize asylum seekers within Mexican territory (including police and migration agents). Furthermore, to date, the Mexican government has failed to develop any program to support asylum seekers who have been returned to Mexico as a result of the MPP (Lin 2019) and has used new tactics justified as COVID-19 protection measures to deter and dissipate northbound migrant caravans (Civil Society Organizations 2021).

Shifting Trends within Migration and Mobility Scholarship

Since the late-20th Century, migration and mobility scholarship has undergone significant shifts,

alongside changes in patterns and circumstances of migration. In the 1990's, scholars embraced the exploration of modern mobility through concepts such as "flows" (Appadurai 1996; Castells 1996), cosmopolitanism (Calhoun 2008; Harvey 2009), flexible citizenship (Ong 1999), care chains (Yeats 2009), and cultural hybridity (Nyongesa 2018). Although this scholarship helped move the conversation beyond frameworks of cultural assimilation and bounded conceptualizations of cultural practice and community (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Kearney 1995), it still primarily centered on migrant sending and receiving communities and dichotomous categorizations (e.g., legal vs. illegal, mobile vs. immobile, international vs. internal). Limited attention has been paid to the nuanced experiences and encounters that occur along the way, and even less so to the critical role of the journey itself in shaping migrant outcomes. As Vogt discusses in her recent ethnography on "Lives in Transit":

> Most of the world's migrants – and asylum seekers – do not simply board a jetliner or a cruise ship and arrive at their destinations a few hours or days later. On the contrary, they may live in a liminal state of transit for weeks, months, or even years as they attempt to cross land and sea borders, earn enough to live on, evade immigration controls, hire smugglers, secure shelter, feed themselves, and find protection. By not considering transient populations, the embodied realities of people traversing different socio-spatial zones are overlooked" (2018: 5).

In light of this paucity of frameworks, migration scholarship has seen a substantial surge in recent years in methodological and theoretical approaches that attempt to trace the complex social dynamics of "transit migration" (Holmes 2013; Brigden 2016; 2018; W. Vogt 2018). "Transit migration" has been commonly understood as: "movements of people from a supposed country of origin through various countries en route until they arrive in a supposedly final destination country" (Collyer, Düvell, and de Haas 2012). However, the conceptualization and application of the term has varied widely across geographic, cultural, and policy contexts.

Indeed, the concept of "transit migration" originally emerged within a highly contested

political environment, beginning in the late 1990's, over the realities of migration within and around the peripheries of Europe (Wallace, Chmouliar, and Sidorenko 1996) (for a detailed genealogy of the concept of "transit migration" see: Collyer, Duvell, & Hans 2012). At this time, the term was frequently used in international policy documents as code for problematic forms of "illegal immigration" (International Organization for Migration (IOM) 1994; 1995). In turn, the way that it was initially constructed and deployed within academic scholarship did not reflect presumptions about a stark conceptual departure from earlier, mid-century migration studies, but was rather an attempt to critique and problematize its use within political and popular discourse (Düvell 2012). As Bredaloup relates, "Transit migration is not a completely new phenomenon. In fact the real novelty is that it is perceived or presented as new by international experts" (2012: 1). In response, much of the seminal work on transit migration that came out of Europe in the early 2000's aimed to capture the complex social dynamics and multi-directionality of transit migration in order to expose the political motives underlying discursive practices of migrant classification (Hess 2012; Al-Sharmani 2014) and to illuminate the broader structural and political forces that shape and sustain transit conditions (such as in the case of the rejected asylum seekers or those "stuck in mobility") (Yükseker and Brewer 2011; Kaytaz 2016).

In their discussion on ways to advance the research agenda on transit migration, Collyer and Hans (2012) emphasize the need to highlight *what is new* about the processes, circumstances, and, in particular, the fragmented nature of migration in contemporary times. Of central concern is the shifting nature of migrant journeys as a result of the proliferation of state migration control practices and infrastructure across the world (e.g., walls, refugee camps, increased policing of waters and physical borders). Whereas older studies predominantly discussed limitations to mobility in terms of social stratification and resources, such as women

and children being left behind to sustain households or due to the impediments of poverty (Ullah 2017; Jong 2000; Hugo 1995; Murray 1981), today, stalled or denied mobility often occurs *en route* and is largely a result of state-orchestrated interventions that result in long periods of waiting (in transit zones and beyond) and other unanticipated events. Contemporary migrant journeys rarely reflect a linear, continuous trek from point A to point B, but more commonly consist of a pattern of successive, circuitous movements, interspersed by periods of fixity and stasis, that can extend for months into years.

In response, beginning in the early 2000's, a wave of studies by anthropologists and migration scholars began to apply new conceptual frameworks for understanding the social worlds and "lived realities of transit" (Vogt 2018: 5) that both shape and are shaped by migrant journeys within dominant migration corridors. These seminal works attend to core concepts such as the "intimate economies of mobility" (Vogt 2018); survival strategies of improvisation and performativity en route (Brigden 2018); industries of illegality that produce clandestine subjecthood and risk (Holmes 2013; Andersson 2014); temporal-spatial dimensions of immigration administration (Gill 2009; Griffiths 2014); and the collective imaginaries about journeys, crossings, and arrivals (Phillips 2012; Kushner 2012; Zijlstra and Liempt 2017). Much of this scholarship attempts to challenge dominant state narratives of migration through grounded empirical work that occurs "alongside migrants at various points in their journey" (Mainwaring & Brigden 2016: 258).

Despite the important contributions these bodies of literature have made to advancing mobility and migration studies, we still lack grounded, empirical work in diverse contexts that can help generate robust comparative perspectives and that put mobility theories to the test. Although periods of imposed immobility en route have been increasingly recognized as an

inherent and often unavoidable stage in migrant trajectories (Basok 2015), there is still limited understanding about the impact of experiences that occur within conditions of stalled and denied mobility on migrant subjectivities, actions, and outcomes. Nor has there been adequate exploration of the way that migrant *immobilization* is reshaping the local communities in which it occurs, as well as how it may factor into dominant public debates, political discourse, and direct political action aimed at shifting the drivers and conditions of transit migration.

Furthermore, there is need for greater exploration of the role of shifting demographics in defining new patterns and experiences within transit migration. Although gender has been a central focus of migration scholarship since the 1970's, the role of gender must be continuously reevaluated in light of evolving world events and the emergent social and political configurations that make up new migratory contexts. For example, recent anthropological studies have explored the unique strategies that women migrants deploy in efforts to navigate obstacles of stalled migration and create new opportunities for continuing their journeys, revealing distinct vulnerabilities among women, but also novel forms of resourcefulness and resilience (Pian 2010; Brigden 2018; Tyszler 2019). In addition, despite worldwide trends of increasing numbers of families, children, and LGBTQ migrants, critical intersections between gender and other axes of social stratification continue to be overlooked in academic scholarship, and are not often reflected in broader policy and pubic discussions about migration (La Barbera 2012; Pisani, Grech, and Mostafa 2016). Greater consideration of how differently-positioned migrant subjects navigate spaces of (im)mobility is crucial to unveiling new insights about contemporary migration and to generating applicable, concrete recommendations for policy and programming to advance migrant rights.

Social Worlds of Entrapment: Practices of power and resistance within a transnational refugee regime

My research examines the lived experiences of Central American refugees seeking international protection along both of Mexico's borders, as well as the diverse effects of transnational refugee policies on how (and if) refugees' objectives are ultimately achieved. It draws on a range of archives and over 18 months of experience-near ethnographic research with Central American refugees. My main analytical framework highlights intimate aspects of refugees' embodied and emotional experiences of state practices of regulation. By probing the key role that im/mobility plays in how people imagine, engage, and contest the conditions of forced displacement, it links refugees' evolving sense of self and society to broader political arrangements (Desjarlais 1997; Willen 2007).

Following the call of Collyer and Hans (2012), I seek to address what is new within contemporary transit migration. My goal is to contribute to the literature by focusing on emergent socio-political arrangements and outcomes among "trapped populations" (Black and Collyer 2014) within the evolving Central America-Mexico-USA refugee regime. Throughout this study, I argue that the interrogation of underlying logics and practices within the system of Mexico state refugee management (and the transnational collusion that sustains it), as well as the lived experiences of those migrants immersed within this system, provides an expansive window onto broader processes of power, governance, resistance, and differential consequences among migrant populations. My analysis is inspired by a rich body of feminist scholarship on the linkages between refugee laws and procedures, nation-state sovereignty, affect and emotion, and the gendered meanings and implications of im/mobility (Malkki 1995; Hage 2004; Griffiths 2014; Mata-Codesal 2015; 2017). I am particularly concerned with the impact of institutional

interventions aimed at refugee protection and support, as opposed to explicitly punitive or draconian measures of migration control (e.g., surveillance, detention). This approach aims to expand understanding of how diverse, and often subtler, processes of power take shape through intimate, embodied, and existential dimensions of migrants' life worlds and social experiences. It also helps generate considerable insight into myriad ways that individuals subjectively interpret and act upon the institutional discourses and practices that continuously regulate their access to mobility and essential resources.

Central to my argument is the role of mobility and *im*mobility in shaping both material and existential possibilities within refugees' lives. I assert that struggles over im/mobility figure prominently in shaping broader patterns of social and political change. With particular attentiveness to the embodied experiences that emerge at the interface between individuals and the institutional practices that deny, constrain, or promote mobility, this study places refugees at the center of society's most pressing concerns about bodily rights and the freedom to aspire. As I have found in my research, for many displaced people (in Mexico and beyond), mobility is both a means of survival, as well as a crucial source of resistance to the social constraints that migrants' capacities to prosper and define themselves. How these struggles are enacted occur within the socio-spatial and sensorial experience of mobility as a distinct, experiential process through which meaning is made and interpreted, rather than just a means to an end. In other words, mobility is not simply a physical traversal of space, but a contested social site through which claims for identity, rights, and belonging are asserted and transformed.

I strive to provide a more deeply nuanced conceptualization of the multiple im/mobilities that refugees face in the course of their trajectories as an entry point into three primary interventions. First, I explore socio-spatial shifts and subjective accounts of im/mobility among

displaced individuals and their communities across a range of distinct social spheres. This approach reveals critical linkages between the embodiment of physical mobility and the ways that mobility is experienced as an **existential condition**: for example, in border zones where "waiting" for asylum becomes a test of emotional stamina or in the mobile communities formed *en route* where resilience is harnessed. I argue that the existentiality of immobility is central to how processes of power over migrants' movements and livelihoods are felt, subjectively interpreted, and acted upon by migrants and their communities.

Secondly, I explore of the role of **institutional encounters** in how migrants navigate their surrounding social worlds and struggle towards future endeavors while moving through Mexico. Through this lens, I probe critical intersections between social logics undergirding practices of containment and care with broader nationalist agendas. This includes encounters within refugee- specific agencies and organizations (e.g., COMPAR, INM), as well as other sites of social assistance, such as domestic violence shelters and healthcare institutions. Findings demonstrate how gender and emotion are key organizing principles in the logics that undergird institutional practices and the diverse ways that migrants cope with the imposed conditions of refugee assistance and care.

The third aim is to examine how migrants in transit **engage and resist** specific forms of im/mobility, and how associated practices become crucial sources of personal and collective resilience. Although political objectives and rights-based discourse are important to these accounts, my analysis draws upon alternative frameworks that emphasize existential and emotional processes of subjecthood, such as spirituality and self-representation, in order to illuminate how resilience is fostered through collective action and mobility. Throughout, I deploy an intersectional perspective to illuminate how im/mobility is differentially experienced

across key axes of social diversity, particularly gender and sexuality, in the context of transit migration.

The Existentiality of Immobility

Im/mobility is not merely a physical condition, but also a state of mind, tied to ideas and imaginaries about the promises and perils of spatiotemporal survival and transformation. Specifically, I argue that bringing existentiality to the center of the analysis sets the stage for new ways of theorizing displacement that do not rely on state-centric frameworks (i.e., notions of legality and geopolitical borders); alternatively, a framework of existentiality probes critical intersections between mobility and key life projects, such as the capacity to envision a future, to pursue sexual trajectories, and to exercise political and human rights. This also helps generate new insights into diverse social and institutional mechanisms through which power operates in shifting regimes of refugee management, as well as the strategies that individuals and their communities engage to respond, resist, and negotiate the social and structural forces that shape their mobile trajectories. As Riccio asserts:

> In order to understand the agency of mobile people and their subjectivities, it is necessary to not only build on, but also go beyond the investigation of material conditions, social networks and constraints that affect people's lives…it needs to be something existential, such as ideas of not being stuck, of being able to see a future (Riccio 2016).

Central to this framework is the crucial role of intimate, bodily experiences in linking the materiality of mobility with abstract dimensions of social experience and subjectivity. Bougleux asserts that "every event of im/mobility also has a material side, as moving bodies mobilize resources and call for practical responses" (2016: 14). However, the materiality of immobility never occurs in isolation; it is continuously interpreted and contextualized through cultural and existential understandings about one's sense of self and future life course. That is, subjectivities

may be significantly disrupted and transformed through bodily experiences that occur during the course of migrant trajectories. For example, as I found in related research that I conducted as a consultant with UNHCR, migrants who return to Central America with severe disabilities after enduring train accidents or acts of physical violence, may find themselves at the crux of multiple immobilities (e.g., physical, economic, social), and forced to contend with major shifts in identity related to gender roles and relations, alterations in physical capacity, and loss of self-worth as a result of "failed" migration (Wurtz and Wilkinson 2020).

New subjectivities may also arise through subtler shifts in how one inhabits and moves through space, or what Willen describes as one's "sense of being-in-the-world" (2007). In contrast to discrete events that precipitate rapid bodily change, this often occurs through routine, daily practices and shifts in one's spatiotemporal engagement with the surrounding environment. For example, in my dissertation research, interlocutors commonly described a subjective sense of entrapment while undergoing prolonged periods of waiting for refugee case resolution or other forms of legal status. They discussed these perceptions in terms such as "feeling locked up" (*encerrado*), "dead alive" (*muerto en vida*), and "like a blind dog that runs in circles, desperate to see the light" (*como asi esta el perro, estamos ciegos, pero…dando vueltas para poder ver la luz*). Studies reporting similar findings show that perceptions of entrapment often unfold in contexts of stalled mobility typified by conditions of forced idleness and limited opportunities for employment or education. These generate a deep sense of wasted time, never-ending anticipation, or a failure to achieve important life goals or even more immediate, urgent priorities (Griffiths 2014; Schwartz 1974; Bjertrup et al. 2021; Elliot 2016). Hage (2004) has described this as a subjective sense of being "stuck" in place as a form of "existential trauma" that is commonly related to perceptions of unfulfilled aspirations or longing for a spatial or temporal

elsewhere.

Among my interlocutors, a sense of entrapment was often exacerbated by perceptions of eminent danger and unmet, basic needs – conditions that both restrict physical movement within local surroundings and increase a sense of frustration and hopelessness of living a life on pause. Take for instance, the case of Sari and her family of ten, which included three small children and a young woman in a wheelchair. After three years in Tapachula and three subsequent denials for refugee status, the family continued to contend with economic instability, joblessness, limited access to health care, and targeted acts of crime and exploitation as a result of their lack of legal status. In other words, they were confined to a perpetual state of precarity. Such conditions of indeterminate temporality impede meaningful community integration, creating a "melancholic existence" of being suspended between attachments to an irreconcilable past and an unreachable future (Butler 1997). Here, we observe a penetrating form of existential dissonance of being physically "stuck" in place and, simultaneously, socially uprooted.

Attentiveness to the social and subjective impact of perceived entrapment reveals how protracted immobility functions as a potent marker of social differentiation and "entrenched alterity" (Griffith 2014: 1998). As Griffith notes (ibid), this often occurs through the visible demarcation of refugees as fundamentally different from local community members, such as through differences in how refugees inhabit and move through public space. In addition, as I argue throughout this work, this also makes a significant impact on migrant wellbeing and life possibilities through the existential distancing of individuals from the "good-life fantasies" (Berlant 2011) that sustain critical sources of resilience and emotional fortitude, such as the capacity to exercise hope, planning, and futurity. Such experiences of existential alienation from self and society can wreak devastating outcomes on one's sense of self-worth and personal

security, often leading individuals to make high-risk decisions in order to cope with and adapt to such conditions (e.g., case abandonment, covert travel with a human smuggler, engaging in sex work to make ends meet). That said, experiences and consequences of existential alienation are not uniform and tend to vary widely by context, circumstances, and intersectional social identities (e.g., class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity).

As I describe in the following section, gender is a particularly salient, yet underexplored, analytic in theorizing the existentiality of immobility. Bringing gender, mobility, and existentiality into the conversation generates new insight into how institutional interventions aimed at migrants and refugees within transit zones are differentially experienced, interpreted, and acted upon across axes of social diversity. It also sheds light on how normative gender assumptions intersect with dominant mobility imaginaries to create specific challenges, opportunities, and consequences unique to migrant women.

The Paradoxes of Protection: Subjective and embodied dimensions of institutional intervention during periods of forced immobility

Comparative studies have shown that migrant women are more prone to "getting stuck" at various stages of the migration trajectory (Tyzler 2019). In my own work, I found that this was often as a result of gender-based realities, such as necessary delays in women's trajectories in order to give birth or arrange for the subsequent arrival of children from their countries of origin. However, the imposed stasis of women is also fueled by deeply entrenched social assumptions – the *mobility imaginaries* – about who constitutes a socially acceptable mobile subject and the specific means through which that status is permitted or denied.

Gender has been a particularly salient factor in studies that explore the underlying logics of mobility imaginaries. In contexts of female immobility that occur alongside strong flows of

male out-migration, scholars have attributed women's delayed or non-existent migration to the impact of gender expectations about motherhood and caretaking that glorify feminized notions of staying put and homesteading (Hugo 1981; De Jong 2000), opposed to hyper-masculinized concepts of mobility (Malkki 1995; Creswell 2006; Hyndman and Giles 2011). Studies across the Americas, for example, have shown how alarmist discourses about international female migration are generated through frameworks of family destruction and female sexual deviance (Lagomarsino 2014; Gutiérrez and Romero 2015; Manchanda 2004). Within this framework, the woman-mother figure is featured predominantly in the social desirability of female stasis; those who demonstrate gendered social values associated with immobility, such as patience, passivity, and the rootedness of social reproduction are rewarded, while those who oppose immobility are actively punished and discredited as "bad mothers" (Mata-Codesal 2017: 156; Hyndman & Giles 2011).

Such logics undergird nationalist projects of refugee control and border securitization. Refugees who conform to sedentary social scripts are afforded legitimacy and deservingness. This effectively turns refugees into feminized victims and objects of intervention, producing and reproducing "voiceless, passive refugee subjectivity" (Hyndman and Giles 2011: 367). Refugees who diverge from this logic and attempt to access mobility through other means are portrayed as threatening and suspicious, justifying state measures of criminalization and expulsion. Such measures incentive populations to self-regulate how they engage and perform mobility (Ticktin 2011; Mata-Codesal 2017; Brigden 2018), and in turn, justifies state and non-state interventions of surveillance and control over the mobility of others (Creswell 2006; Tzyler 2019).

While previous work has provided a powerful framework for understanding how gender regimes and nation-state ideology intersect to constrain women migrants' mobility, it raises

further questions of how such power dynamics translate into everyday practice, particularly under conditions of purported humanitarian aid, as well as the concrete human consequences that result from such interventions. My study addresses this conceptual gap by interrogating the gendered logics of institutional policies within distinct social domains of refugee management and intervention: first, in relation to bureaucratic timelines that regulate the refugee application process and impose long periods of waiting for case resolution upon applicants under precarious conditions; and, second, within sites of assistance for victims of gender-based violence. A central argument that I make by looking across these two domains is that gender-based assumptions about women migrants, particularly perceptions of female vulnerability and victimhood, "correct" motherhood, and the gendered performativity of values (patience, compliance, and sexual non-promiscuity) serve to perpetuate a continuum of gender-based violence and inequality. This takes shape through specific measures and justifying logics that impede physical mobility of women and other forms of bodily autonomy (e.g., ability to make decisions about health and wellbeing of self and family, or spatial containment within institutional sites).

It is important to note that women are not simply passive recipients of institutional subjection and physical restriction. The ways that women make sense of and act upon barriers to their mobility reveal a range of responses – from reluctant acquiescence to complete resistance. However, their responses most commonly reflect some form of negotiation between complex structural constraints and consideration of a range of personal and circumstantial factors (e.g., perceptions about the best interests of their children, opportunities that arise through networks formed en route).

In many cases, women draw upon normative gender roles and identities to overcome structural and circumstantial impediments. Previous scholarship has highlighted women's efforts

to access social and physical mobility through the exchange of sexual services (Tyszler 2019; Pian 2010), through pregnancy and childrearing (Stock 2012), or by acquiescing to long delays caused by bureaucratic timelines (Auyero 2012). Similarly, my findings reveal that women sometimes positively integrate gendered assumptions of imposed stasis into subjective understandings of their life projects, particularly through narratives of motherhood and self-sacrifice, in order to cope subjectively with the difficult conditions in which they are immersed and to justify their decisions to comply with institutional stipulations. They often viewed compliance with institutional interventions and consequent periods of stasis in Tapachula as a necessary and even strategic engagement with immobility in order to reach long-term goals. In contrast, some women demonstrated active resistance to institutional regulation, such as by engaging undocumented forms of mobility or by deliberately rejecting institutionally defined terms of assistance. This was evident, for example, among women who abandoned open refugee cases or absconded from women's shelters in order to pursue covert, undocumented travel.

Active resistance, especially when carried out in solitary conditions (as opposed to collective responses), was often, although not always, met with consequences of increased risk and precarity. This is not shocking given what is already known about the risks of irregular migration in Mexico, as evidence by countless documented cases of sexual violence, kidnapping, and organized crime among migrants in transit (Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2016; MSF 2019; Suarez and et al. 2017). Ironically, however, my study reveals that even those who complied with institutional impositions of immobility experienced increased vulnerability and negative outcomes, exposing serious fault lines in government and non-governmental claims of refugee aid and protection. Institutional drivers of danger and risk were particularly pronounced among

those populations already in vulnerable conditions, such as women with children, LGBTQ+, and unaccompanied minors.

Felicia's story is a case in point. Felicia is a forty-three-year-old Honduran woman who fled the country with her three sons after the eldest found his life under threat for witnessing the gang murder of his fellow classmate. Felicia and her family resided for months within a protected shelter for refugee families in Tapachula, which she felt was in the best interests of her sons and the future of her family. However, they eventually found it hard to endure the nearly carceral conditions of the shelter walls. As Felicia recounted in an interview: "Being locked up in here, it's like *we* are the delinquents; it's like *we* are the ones who did something wrong. You can't live a normal life here."

When Felicia observed concerning signs of mental distress among her sons due to the conditions of imposed confinement, such as one's reluctance to bathe and a nervous eye twitch of the other, she decided to move the family to independent housing to wait out the remainder of the extensively delayed process of their refugee case. But safe haven within Mexico's central refugee corridor was short-lived for Felicia and her family. Weeks later, her eldest son was beaten to death by local gangs in a town on the outskirts of Tapachula. Once again, Felicia and her remaining two sons were put under state protection – trapped within government walls and now facing even longer delays of northbound mobility, even though they had even greater cause for getting out of the southern border region. It wasn't until Felicia and her sons made their way to Tijuana – through their own covert means – requested US-asylum, and re-settled in Los Angles that Felicia finally felt a sense of physical and existential security. This is only one of many cases that I documented of migrants who experienced acts of violence, crime, extortion,

homicide, sexual abuse, and family separation and loss while living under conditions of legal refugee protection.

Substantial humanitarian scholarship, such as seminal work by Ticktin (2007), Biehl (Biehl and Eskerod 2013), and others (Wheeler 2010; Calhoun 2008; Jacobsen 2015) has helped us think through the deleterious, often unintended effects of aid interventions. However, the key role of social assumptions and imaginaries about im/mobility in how humanitarian interventions are formulated and enforced has rarely been explored. My project expands understanding of the violence and paradoxes of institutional "protection" by interrogating less visible dynamics and gendered impositions of regulation over mobility and other forms of bodily autonomy that undergird the refugee aid-migrant control complex. I argue that until access to mobility is recognized as a principle social determinant of inequality, the positive reach of institutional intervention will continue to be limited and the primary drivers of mobility-related inequality will not be adequately understood or addressed.

Collective Resistance to Conditions of Imposed Immobility

An analytical framework of existentiality and (im)mobility may also reveal alternative responses of coping and adaptation that reinforce personal or collective resilience. As options and modes of mobility are disrupted, traditional avenues to forming identity, belonging, security, and the maintenance of cultural and familial ties are transformed or made more difficult to access. However, such ruptures in the lifeworlds of those who are immobilized may also create new opportunities for novel ways of understanding oneself and society and engaging in previously unexplored avenues of social practice. Recent studies in migration scholarship, for example, have found that the liminality of "in-between" spaces of migration has allowed refugees to enjoy freedoms generally circumscribed by social and religious expectations (e.g.

modes of dating and diversion) (Griffith 2014) and to develop informal networks and skill sets that improve access to social and physical mobility (Vono-de-Vilhena and Vidal-Coso 2012; Mountz 2011; Khan 2013). Although these studies have made an important contribution to advancing the literature on agency and resilience in conditions of imposed immobility, the majority hone in on individual coping mechanisms, rather than collective responses.

In response, I examine collective action and organizing among migrants who participated in the 2017 and 2018 migrant caravans. This contributes to a limited, yet growing body of scholarship that has begun to examine the role of involuntary immobility in the emergence of social movements for migrant rights. In both Üstübici's (2016) study on migrants in Morocco and Kallius and colleagues' (Kallius, Monterescu, and Kumar Rajaram 2016) analysis of the "refugee crisis" in Hungary, the scholars assert that the collective action of irregular migrants and refugees arose in direct response to state measures of immobilization and the precarious conditions in which migrants and refugees were forced to reside. In both locations, movements were framed in direct opposition to the externalization of EU migration control policies, raising important questions about the responsibility of the governments of transit countries to ensure migrants' fundamental rights and access to mobility despite their prospective trajectories. My research extends this literature through the use of alternative conceptual frameworks that include, but do not center on political goals and strategies. In contrast, I aim to provide new ways of understanding social movements, for instance the caravan movement, through an emphasis on spiritual and existential dimensions of collective mobility and practice.

Across the two chapters on the caravan movement (Chapters Four and Five), a predominant theme centers on the emergent or renewed sense of community and shared identity that is given breathe through socio-spatial practices and representations of collective travel. For

instance, in my examination of the spiritual and embodied dimensions of social practice among migrants who participated in the 2017 and 2018 migrant caravans, I contend that, for many, collective mobility became a profound source of coping with the social trauma of continuous terrorization and state violence that occurred within and beyond the boundaries of their countries of origin. Probing the cultural frameworks through which bodily movement was interpreted and contextualized reveals critical linkages between the materiality of mobility (as an embodied practice), on the one hand, and on the other, existential questions about fundamental aspects of the human condition, such as sociality, spiritual sacrifice, heightened sensorial experience, and conceptualizations of "the good life."

Critical to my analysis is the important role of the journey itself in cultivating resilience, as well as empowering individuals to recognize their own potential in fomenting collective action and solidarity. This is an important element unique to the migrant caravan movement, which is not often observed in other types of social movements and activism. Such as the case of Central American LGBTQ youth who were involved in grassroots organizing efforts during the course of their journeys through Mexico, which I discuss in Chapter Five. Here, building upon extant literature on agentive youth, solidarity, and political consciousness (Sharp 2002; Russell 2002; Aggleton, Cover, and Leahy 2019), I demonstrate how youth's sustained engagement with the media and other public spheres during the course of their collective trajectory created a productive space for exploring a new sense of shared identity based on the intersection of their status as migrants and gender- and sexual-minorities. It also gave rise to critical discourse and concerted efforts among youth to shape new narratives about their lives and imagined futures, particularly through the use of digital media (e.g., photographs, videos, informal virtual networks). For many youth, such experiences created a foundation for further political

engagement, which they have continued to exercise while awaiting asylum in the US, contributing to the advancement of a new, more inclusive movement within LGBTQ rights activism in the US and beyond.

Through frameworks of existentiality, gender, embodiment, and resistance, we can see the differential impact of macro-level immobilizing forces on the meso- and micro-level realities of migrant populations. This challenges scholars to find new ways to conceptualize (im)mobility that retain the material and mobile realities of displacement, while also recognizing immobility as a psychosocial and existential phenomenon intimately linked to global processes of power and inequality. Lubkeman (Lubkemann 2008), for instance, suggests thinking about mobility and displacement in terms of how the displacing event disrupts key life projects, including the specific socio-spatial practices and strategies upon which those projects are premised. Since we cannot simply say that increased mobility is the solution to immobility, we need to interrogate the specific mechanisms, characteristics, forms of capital (e.g., cultural, social), etc. through which individuals are able to cope with or resist immobilizing forces. In Chapter Two, I turn to the role of institutions in Tapachula to explore how immobilizing forces are transmitted through the practices and discourses that circulate within institutional sites and, in turn, how such forces are experienced, negotiated, and opposed by those targeted by aid intervention.

Chapter Two

THE "PARADOX" OF PROTECTION: REFUGEE MANAGEMENT AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE SOUTHERN MEXICO BORDERLANDS

In this chapter, I argue that institutional practices of migrant aid, particularly aimed at women, are shaped by the intersection of *normative gender expectations* and a dominant *mobility imaginary*. I define "mobility imaginary" as widely shared social assumptions about who is entitled to access to human mobility, and associated resources (e.g., legal advocacy, financial assistance), and under what circumstances. I analyze this phenomenon through an exploration of specific institutional sites and practices for victims of gender-based violence (GBV), as experienced by Central American migrant women living along the southern Mexico border in Tapachula, Chiapas. Institutional sites encompass both government-run and civil-society agencies and organizations. Findings reveal that the underlying logics of institutional intervention result in a troubling paradox of purported protective measures of migrant aid and assistance, in which specific forms of repression and inequality are produced and sustained in the lives of migrant women through the failure of institutional interventions to address root causes of GBV.

In recent years, thousands of women from the Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador have been forcibly displaced for reasons of domestic violence, rape, forced prostitution, and other forms of GBV. These countries have displayed consistently high rates of femicide (gender-based homicide) since the early 2000's to the present; in 2018, El Salvador and Honduras were ranked number one and number two for highest rates of femicide (per 100,000 women) in Latin America, and Guatemala was ranked number five (Statista Research Department 2021).This has resulted in what some have called an "invisible refugee

crisis" (Geneva Declaration 2015), an often overlooked phenomenon that is "driving an exodus" of Central American women who cross into Mexico to find safe haven for themselves and their children (M. Ahmed et al. 2019). In 2016, one in every three women migrants interviewed along the southern Mexico border cited GBV as her primary motive for emigrating (UNHCR 2016).

Although GBV in these countries is not a new phenomenon, it has taken on a new level of intensity and danger since the onset of unbridled gang violence in the early 2000's, along with deteriorating conditions of the capacity of the state to prevent and control violence and organized crime. (I will provide more background information about the context of violence in women's countries of origin in a subsequent section of this chapter.) Despite the high prevalence of interpersonal violence that women experience, they do not flee their countries solely to escape the immediate violence of individual aggressors, but also in response to a generalized climate of institutional and legal violence. This is produced through state impunity of crimes committed against them and the failure of the state to uphold supportive measures and laws to protect them.

For instance, in a UN study conducted in 2015 with Central American and Mexican women seeking asylum in the US, 60% of women interviewed had reported attacks, threats, and other forms of violence to police or other authorities in their countries of origin before emigrating (UNHCR 2015). Among these respondents, all stated that they had received inadequate protection or no protection at all (ibid). This type of violence does not end when women leave their countries; for many, emigration is just the beginning of a continuum of institutional failures that they encounter at every stage in the migration process, with profound implications for how their bodies are perceived, targeted, and transformed throughout their migrant trajectories.

Although physical violence against women in border regions of Mexico has been discussed extensively in the extant literature (Schmidtke 2020; Washington Valdez 2006; Staudt 2008; Duarte 2008), there has been considerably less attention given to how processes of GBV are produced and sustained through *institutional responses* to women's bodily harm, as well as the specific gendered implications of intervention. For example, for many women informants in my study, inter-personal violence was intimately entangled with various aspects of social and physical reproduction that differed from the experiences of men, including rape-induced pregnancy, pregnancy loss, familial separation and disrupted motherhood, and fear of retaliation and pursuit of the aggressor. In response, institutional practices specifically target women's gendered and sexualized bodies, such as through hospital-based rape responses programs or closed-door shelter interventions for (female) victims of inter-familial violence. Still little is understood about the lived experiences of women who navigate these complex institutional encounters and how they negotiate the regulatory control of incredibly intimate aspects of their reproductive and sexual lives.

In this chapter, I examine how the intersection of institutional practices of refugee assistance and normative gender regimes structures women's lived experiences of coping with and transcending GBV. I argue that the responses of Mexican institutions to address GBV among refugee women reproduce and exacerbate many of the same underlying processes of GBV that incited women to flee their countries in the first place. In addition to the reproduction of durable forms of gender inequality, interventions frequently put women at further risk by steering them toward outcomes that align with nationalist projects of migration control, primarily through immobilization and systematic exclusion within border zones.

In order to lay out my argument, I begin with an overview of my conceptual framework, followed by a brief description of the specific research sample and methods that these findings draw upon. I then provide important background information about the context of GBV in Central American countries from which women flee, as well as a subsequent section on political responses to GBV in Mexico. The main analysis that follows discusses specific ways that power and subjectification operate through mechanisms of institutional practices and policies aimed at assisting migrant women who have endured experiences of GBV. Finally, in order to demonstrate the continuum of institutional violence that migrant women face throughout the course of their trajectories, I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of women's experiences in US-based institutional sites of migration control and regulation.

Conceptualizing the Productive Power of Institutional Intervention

I conceptualize my argument through a framework of structural violence, or the normalized, cumulatively deleterious effects of the conditions, policies and practices directed towards specific populations within institutional settings (Menjívar and Walsh 2017; Galtung 1969; Paul Farmer 2004). This is often thought of in terms of acts of omission, "as when a negligent state 'averts its gaze' and simply looks the other way" (Menjívar and Walsh 2017; see also Scheper-Hughes 2009; Biehl and Eskerod 2013). In turn, acts of omission compound other forms of structural, symbolic, gendered, and economic inequalities in ways that systematically naturalize and amplify GBV. Many of my interlocutors, for instance, had limited power to protect themselves and their children from violent perpetrators due to factors such as unequal access to legal assistance because of income disparities or as a result of threats and collusion by men's associates that included gang members, police agents, and others.

Scholars assert that acts of state omission occur at every step of women's migrant trajectories, including in countries of origin, transit, and destination (Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Menjívar and Walsh 2017). Indeed, in my research, I found substantial evidence corroborating such assertions. However, I argue that it is not only through the denial of protection and supportive services that institutional violence takes hold of women's bodies and lives. It also works *through* such interventions, as a productive mechanism of power, by shaping women's subjectivities, and in the ways in which their experiences of violence and injustice are recognized and made legible.

Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice is particularly useful in examining this phenomenon (Fricker 2007). According to this theory, there are two primary forms of injustice that specifically target one's *"capacity as a knower"* (2007: 1) to interpret and act upon wrongs that they have endured. The first, *testimonial injustice*, occurs when the credibility of one's testimony of injustice is deflated or completely denied based on an a priori prejudice on the part of the hearer. This surfaced frequently in my research when women's recounting of GBV was questioned by institutional actors because of their subjective judgments about women's attitudes or ways of communicating. The second, *hermeneutical injustice*, occurs "when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences," for example when a woman suffers GBV in a society that lacks the concept of gender inequality (ibid). I observed hermeneutical injustice across a range of settings in which institutional actors failed to acknowledge the context of women's lives and encouraged emotional repression or regulation over validation of women's subjective experiences.

Examining ways that institutional interventions of women's aid serve to reproduce gender-based inequality may help to explain how Mexico – a country of asylum that was once heralded as a vanguard of legislative reform to combat GBV – continues to be an epicenter of misogynist murders of women made vulnerable through migrant status, race/ethnicity, class, and other axes of inequality. By interrogating the underlying logics of government and civil-society intervention, as well as the corporeal and psychic effects of intervention on women's lives, this work illuminates the mismatch between the real and intended consequences of efforts to combat GBV, raising important questions about the limits of a politics of protection that prioritizes political agendas over the actual needs of aid recipients.

Research Sample and Methods

The findings presented in this chapter draw from a specific subset population of the broader research sample (N=35). The majority of my informants were women between 17-45 years old from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Most had been married or living with partners, but had fled their countries alone or accompanied by some or all of their children. Whether or not GBV was their primary incentive for fleeing the country, the overwhelming majority of informants reported having experienced one or more instances of GBV, including intra-familial pedophilia and child abuse, partner abuse, and physical and sexual violence committed by members of gangs and organized crime. Most women were temporarily residing in Tapachula (ranging from one week to three years), and were actively pursuing refugee status or some other form of legal protection. I also conducted interviews with professional informants across a range of institutional sites, including social service providers, health care professionals, academics, and human rights lawyers and activists.

Participant-observation specific to this chapter included over 100 hours in two primary locations: government and non-government shelters for victims of GBV and local migrant shelters. I spent much of my time "hanging out" with women in long expanses of unstructured time within institutional walls, although I also spent time with them in planned activities (e.g., art projects, English lessons, exercise classes) which I helped organize and run in order to counter the boredom and monotony of institutional life. I also accompanied women (among those permitted to leave institutional housing) to appointments with government and social service organizations, such as to healthcare clinics, COMAR, ACNUR, CDH Fray Matías, and other agencies of migrant and refugee aid.

Gender-based Violence as a Driver of Emigration

Although violence affects everyone in Central American countries, and more men are victims of homicide in these countries, violence is experienced vary differently across genders. The violence that women suffer, for instance, is much more commonly perpetrated by intimate partners or other family members, and is more likely to be sexualized than the violence that men experience. It is more common for women to have postmortem signs of sexualized abuse and torture (IACHR (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2013). For many women informants in my study, violence was intimately entangled with various aspects of physical reproduction, sexuality, and childrearing.

In many cases, women's decisions to flee the country of origin was a last resort; it was only made only once the situation had escalated to the point where the woman seriously feared for her life or the life of her children, and after several failed attempts to find alternative solutions, such as seeking assistance and support from law enforcement, legal systems, hospitals, and other public service providers. When access to safety and protection from violence could not

be secured, women then turned to alternative means that forced them to accept new risks and to make impossible sacrifices.

Such was the case for Sarahí, a twenty-six-year-old woman from Honduras. In Honduras, Sarahí was severally abused by her husband. She miscarried when she was nine months pregnant as a result of repeated punches to the abdomen and uterus. Her perpetrator was brought to trial, but Sarahi did not win the case, which she attributed to the incompetency of her public attorney who could not compete with the private paid lawyer whom her husband hired. She reported the abuse a second time, but then dropped charges after she was threatened by members of her husband's family who were also involved in the *Dieciocho* gang. She fled the country after her husband threatened to kill her and her children, leaving her three children behind in an orphanage.

Such experiences with profound institutional bias in women's countries of origin influence how they perceive and engage institutional encounters in countries of asylum. For example, in my research I found that women often avoided institutional encounters and were reluctant to seek services. Women were hesitant, for instance, to report acts of violence, to sign up for free health insurance, or to interface with law enforcement, even though there are specific institutions and policies in place for migrants in need of such services. This was often the result of women's inherent mistrust of institutions based on experiences within their home countries compounded by anecdotal and experiential knowledge of widespread abuses towards migrants perpetrated by INM agents within Mexico. In fact, several women themselves had been victims of robbery, physical assault, and extortion by INM agents outside of and within detention centers in Mexico. Furthermore, there was general lack of information among women about the resources and services available (including women's right to seek asylum in Mexico). This may

also have played a role in women's decisions to accept disempowering situations in order to meet basic needs and access whatever form of protection was available. The following case demonstrates how the continuum of institutional violence operates in practice across national borders.

Gabriela, a twenty-year-old from El Salvador, contended with the Salvadoran state's impunity in protecting her from her aggressor, which perpetuated a cycle of ongoing violence. When she was in her teenage years, she suffered a miscarriage after she was repeatedly hit with bats by her boyfriend and fellow gang members. When she sought protection, she discovered a failed state in which gang members were held above the law:

> I went to the Women's Protection agency to file a report, but they couldn't do anything because he [boyfriend] isn't a regular civilian; he's a gang member. So they couldn't do anything. And I got so angry and said that's why this country is this way, because just because he's a gang member they don't want to do a thing.

After her next pregnancy resulted in the birth of a child a couple of years later, her boyfriend began to physically abuse the young child, leading to serious emotional and behavioral disruptions. After he threatened to take the child from her and then kill her, she finally fled the country with her child and sought protection at the women's shelter in Tapachula. Although the shelter helped her meet basic needs, she had no agency in navigating bureaucratic encounters, such as with the Prosecutor's office or COMAR. This is because the progress of her case was completely dependent on the shelter staff, leading to long delays and significant frustration and emotional angst because of the lack of transparency she was afforded. She found herself essentially stuck between the fear of leaving the shelter and the institutional inertia that bound her within the shelter walls. After spending months in the women's shelter with virtually no progress made on her refugee case, Gabriela fled the shelter with her child to continue her

northbound journey through her own means, risking detainment and deportation for obstructing the terms of her refugee case. During her time in the shelter, Gabriela frequently confided to me that if not for the sake of her little boy, she never would have delayed her journey in the first place to apply for refugee status in Tapachula – a common theme among many of my women interlocutors who had small children.

As these cases reveal, women face additional challenges in managing direct and potential violence because of the central role that children play in the origins and consequences of violence. Women often fled not only because of threats to their own lives, but also, and more commonly, because of threats to the lives of their children or threats made by their aggressors to remove the child(ren) from their custody. In many cases women were forced to split their families, taking only the youngest child or the one in the most immediate danger because of economic or logistical constraints.

The emotional toll of leaving children behind and parenting from a distance has been well documented in the literature (Parreñas 2001a; Sternberg 2010; Madianou and Miller 2012) and was a frequent source of emotional distress and sadness among my informants. What has been less explicitly explored in studies is the role that children and parenting play in women's delayed mobility and in their institutional dependence in countries of transit, when compared to their male counterparts. In my research, far more women than men reported staying in Tapachula, rather than continuing towards their intended destination. In addition to making these decisions in light of the risks of covert travel to the safety and wellbeing of their children (such as in Gabriela's case), women were also delayed or immobilized by the material and physical demands of childrearing (e.g., physical toll of pregnancy, tending to illness or other physical needs of children). Women's immobilization in Tapachula was also a result of their efforts to

reunite with children left behind in their countries of origin before continuing the journey. This generally required a drawn out process of making arrangements with other family members who could bring the child to the southern border for a quick hand-off, or careful negotiations with a *coyote* (human trafficker hired for money), since legal recourse was generally too complicated or nearly impossible to pursue (e.g., required parental authorization by the father, applying for a passport in country of origin).

Some women whom I met even returned to Tapachula to reunite with their children despite having suffered acts of violence there, risking re-traumatization and even re-victimization, in the instances where they were found by the aggressor. Sandra, for example, fled Tapachula after she was raped by her landlord (in an apartment she acquired with the help of ACNUR). Months later, she returned to Tapachula to reunite with her daughter and grandchild, who had recently been released by INM after three weeks in detention. When they applied to have her daughter's asylum case transferred to Mexico City because of the fear of residing in the same city as her former aggressor, the request was denied because her daughter had been apprehended in transit (before applying for asylum). So, for weeks, Sandra, her daughter, and granddaughter confined themselves in their hotel room (provided by ACNUR), paralyzed by fear of suffering a subsequent violent encounter when out in the city and other public sites.

As Sandra's case demonstrates, for many migrant women, crossing Mexico's southern border is rarely a guarantee of safety and protection. Women commonly find themselves facing equally precarious conditions and increased dependency on institutional intervention: a situation that, paradoxically, is frequently compounded and/or prolonged by the institutional mechanisms designed, in theory, to improve women's personal security and survival.

Gender-based Violence and Refugee Management in Mexico

Mexico was one of the first countries to sign onto the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and has since passed a number of counter-femicide measures to reduce rates of violence and homicide against women. However, despite seemingly progressive legislation, critics have argued that legal reform was passed primarily in response to international pressure on countries to meet key benchmarks of sustainable development. As Merry writes: "Appearing to promote the human rights of women by ratifying treaties is critical to economic development since it marks the nation as modern and suitable for foreign investment" (Merry 2003). Indeed, studies on GBV in Mexico reveal a striking divergence from purported policy objectives, underscoring the vast divide between the codification of policy and actual implementation of policy in practice.

Reports conducted in Mexico have consistently revealed how institutions fail to provide women adequate protection from GBV, fueling an epidemic such that Mexico now has one of Latin America's highest rates of femicide, alongside El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala (Statista Research Department 2021). While Ciudad Juarez was once considered the Mexican capital of murdered women, violence against women has since spread throughout the country at alarming rates. In fact, between 2001-2010, the number of femicides in Mexico rose by 500% (Olmos 2018). Since 2015 rates of femicide have increased incrementally by nearly 200 deaths per year, and in 2019, Mexico had the second highest absolute number of femicides in Latin America (1, 110 women murder for gender-based reasons), more than double those reported in 2015 (Ahrens-Viquez 2021).

GBV is commonly attributed to enduring patterns of gender inequality in society, including female subordination, patriarchy, economic dependence on men, and the normalization of female victimization. This is then reproduced and sustained through uneven structural and

political processes, such as civil and criminal impunity, institutional negligence, and persistent lack of funding for appropriate investigatory measures to address GBV. In Mexico, only 24% of the 3,892 femicides identified in 2012 and 2013 were investigated by authorities, and only 1.6% (or 62) led to sentencing (Bautista 2013). However, political leaders have consistently failed to prioritize GBV as an issue of national security and have downplayed its severity. For example, when probed by journalists about the high rates of femicide in Mexico, López Obrador, the current Mexico President, has often pointed to problems within the family (e.g., lack of family cohesion, women's social isolation) or questioned the veracity of women's claims[7], rather than acknowledging political and structural inequalities (Sandin 2020). Such an alarming disjuncture in Mexico between the legislation of policy and its political exercise not only normalizes an environment of impunity, but also imposes symbolic power. As Menjivar and Walsh argue: "…the sidelining of women's interests within the justice system reinforces inequality and sends a message to women (and society) that their lives are unimportant" (2017, drawing on (Hermannsdorfer 2012).

GBV in Mexico has clear implications for migration policy and political action. The rise in femicides aligns with enhanced militarization of Mexican cities, undertaken in order to crack down on drug exportation and organized crime. This includes the US-backed *Plan Frontera Sur*, a border fortification strategy along the southern Mexico border and throughout the state of Chiapas, which led to an increase in migratory checkpoints, immigration raids, police surveillance, and skyrocketing rates of deportation. Furthermore, ample evidence has shown high rates of GBV directly specifically towards women migrants; it has been estimated that 60- 80% of migrant women have experienced rape or sexual assault during the migration process in Mexico (Fleury 2016).

In response, there has been a flurry of action to develop the institutional landscape along the southern Mexico border in order to manage the swell of Central American migrants seeking refugee status. Official advocates claimed that developing a more robust refugee program would mitigate many of the dangers posed by irregular, covert migration by allowing migrants to access unhindered mobility and institutional support through newly-constructed bureaucratic channels. Yet, while there has been overwhelming public discourse about the sexual violence that women face when *en route,* comparable attention is missing with respect to the process of seeking international protection. The latter, I will argue, is a risk factor for similar forms of violence and harm.

Women who request refugee status are legally bound by refugee law to resettle temporarily in border regions throughout the course of the application process, which tends to take several months or more. However, many women find that it is much more difficult to gain asylum for the reason of GBV than is reflected in law. According to Mexico's 2011 Refugee Law, GBV is a valid reason for seeking refugee status. This includes domestic violence, forced prostitution, sex trafficking, and child marriage. However, in practice, this is rarely upheld.

According to a Human Rights lawyer in Tapachula who has worked extensively for women migrants:

> What I find really concerning is in the case of women fleeing from intra-familial violence. It is very difficult to gain refugee status if you are unable to show that the aggressor is an affiliated gang member. It's like they [Mexico Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR)] assume that only gang members have the capacity to traverse the country in pursuit of the victim. This is a great risk to many women…COMAR also raises the argument that in purely domestic violence cases (opposed to gang violence) women should be able to seek institutional protection within their home countries. Many women are denied refugee status for that reason alone.

Furthermore, what is less often discussed, but which surfaced prominently in my

research, is the way that women are actively deterred from applying for asylum or ultimately choose to abandon their refugee cases because of the many hurdles and risks that convince them of its futility. This is just one illustration of how institutional measures of protection and aid paradoxically put women at greater risk and increased vulnerability. For example, despite substantial evidence of increased rates of violence against migrant women in border regions of Mexico (UNHCR 2015), Mexican refugee policy continues to stipulate that refugee applicants remain in the state where they file their refugee application for the duration of case review (which is almost always along the southern Mexican border). Although state transfers may be granted in exceptional circumstances to eligible candidates, transfers can take months to be approved and are completely denied to those who were apprehended by migration agents before reaching asylum authorities. In the face of such a massive act of bureaucratic refusal, women then find themselves weighing two possible trajectories: risk the dangers of irregular, covert travel, or remain in Tapachula for months, where they are exposed to myriad forms of vulnerability and exploitation. In addition to the risk of pursuit of aggressors who follow them from nearby home countries, this also includes economic exploitation; violence committed by authorities; and targeted acts of violence and crime, which women are often reluctant to report to law enforcement because of their migratory status.

Among those who do manage to apply for refugee status, the conditions under which they are made to reside often create a dependency on aid institutions, not only for meeting basic life provisions (e.g., food, shelter), but also to address distinct needs of protection and other necessary resources as a result of past and ongoing experiences of GBV and associated sequelae. This often requires complex negotiations with state and civil society institutions, including border patrol agents, refugee offices, women's shelters, health centers, and humanitarian

organizations. However, by seeking care, women expose themselves to distinct forms of institutional surveillance and control, which often derail their desired trajectories and create new challenges and unwanted circumstances. As I demonstrate throughout this analysis, despite the purported objectives of women-centered programming, institutional interventions frequently work to perpetuate, rather than disrupt, the cycles of violence and precarity that have defined women's recent lives or have brought them to official attention in the first place.

Institutional Encounters: Access and Entry

Testimonial Injustice and Feminized Victimhood

Scholars have discussed the moral underpinnings of humanitarian aid practices that determine how resources and services are allocated to migrant and refugee women (S.B. Coutin 1993; Ticktin 2011; Razack 1998). In order to access aid and assistance, women must master and repeatedly perform specific narratives that appeal to the moral imaginaries of those in control of aid allocation, narratives in which women depict themselves as either "unworthy claimants or as supplicants begging to be saved from the tyranny of their own cultures, communities and men" (Razack 1998: 88.). In Tapachula, this takes the form of what I refer to as *feminized victimhood*, primarily demonstrated by women's outward performances of submissiveness, suffering, sexual morality, and unconditional gratitude for institutional intervention. When women fail to uphold such narratives, the credibility of their testimonies comes under scrutiny by institutional actors who hold the reigns over access to critical resources and services.

In Tapachula, the gendered expectations of migrant women's victimhood are structured by two opposing discursive frameworks in the collective imaginary. On the one hand, migrant women are portrayed as helpless victims of violence – particularly of a sexual nature, as the very occurrence of rape is often taken for granted as an inevitable outcome of transit migration. On

the other hand, they are demonized as morally corrupt delinquents who exploit their sexuality to gain resources and social status. In my research, for example, I repeatedly heard comments about the sexual promiscuity of Central American women, a discourse drawn upon to attribute blame to women who experience sexual violence. In both contexts, women's sexual lives are in the spotlight of the public gaze, which not only informs professional decisions regarding the use and allocation of resources, but also affects how women are able to advocate for themselves as rights-bearing agents. In these two opposing frameworks women must conform to standards of feminized victimhood, or risk the material and physical consequences of social abandonment and denied legitimacy.

Such was the case of Yanelli, a forty-two-year-old woman from El Salvador, who had recently suffered a miscarriage after being pushed down a steep flight of stairs by her abusive partner. I met Yanellia shortly after the incident and found out that she and her seven-year-old daughter were still living with her aggressor. Yanelli relayed that she felt "trapped" by her current circumstances, but had nowhere else to turn.

In response, a few days later, I accompanied Yanelli to the local non-government organization for women victims of GBV, in order to seek out information about the clandestine shelter operated by the organization. However, the minute we walked through the door of the shelter agency, the receptionist, without having uttered a single word to Yanelli, was quick to inform us that the shelter was only available to women who had suffered "extreme violence"—as if such a thing takes on only one visible form. After an initial consultation with Yanelli, the organizational staff member communicated that although Yanelli could return to the organization for legal or psychological support, they were unable to offer her a place in the women's shelter.

On a following occasion, in a private discussion with the Assistant Director, he explained

that they had denied Yanelli access to the shelter because of misgivings about the truth of her testimony. He justified this by stating that Yanelli's demeanor was deemed "problematic" and "overly confident"; she failed to demonstrate the external signs of a victim of abuse, which he readily demonstrated to me by assuming a posture of slouched shoulders and a downward gaze. Later that day, when I asked Yanelli if she had consider returning to the shelter office for the free therapy sessions they had offered, she scoffed sarcastically and shook her head, replying, "Apparently I haven't suffered enough. What do I have to do, cut my veins in front of them?"

In addition to outward signs of victimhood, judgments about the veracity of women's testimonies are also structured by assumptions about Central American women's morality (especially of a sexual nature) and their motives for seeking assistance. To demonstrate this, I present the following case study of Lidia, a twenty-year-old from El Salvador. Her story assists in deepening our understanding of the experiences described previously by other women, namely in reference to her age, reproductive status, and how aid organizations view the veracity of her claims. As such, her story typifies that of many other women.

> Lidia fled her hometown in El Salvador because of intra-familial violence and parental negligence. When she first entered the migrant shelter in Tapachula, she was severely underweight and malnourished. I could have wrapped my hand around her bicep. Rumors circulated throughout the shelter that she was HIV+. She had recently become pregnant as the result of a rape she had suffered on the road between the border town of Tacun Uman and Tapachula. However, the veracity of her claims of victimization was continuously discounted and questioned by social actors across institutional sites.
>
> First, she was alienated from shelter services. Workers at the migrant shelter where she was residing openly commented on Lidia's promiscuous sexual behavior and substance abuse. During a private meeting with me and my research assistant about Lidia's health status, the shelter director went on a diatribe about her poor character, reporting that he had seen her smoking pot with a group of young men on multiple occasions. He warned us not to fall prey to her attempts to manipulate us in order to acquire assistance and support.
>
> Given the inhospitable conditions of the migrant shelter, I accompanied Lidia to

the local NGO that specialized in services for women victims of GBV and ran a long-term women's shelter (the same one that I went to with Yanelli). After the initial consultation with the social worker, the NGO extended Lidia the offer to stay in the women's shelter. However, the following day, after Lidia shared with another member of the organization staff that she had felt pressured by the social worker to terminate the pregnancy, the NGO rescinded its offer. Similar to the case of Yanelli, the NGO assured me that Lidia could continue to receive legal or psychological services, but that she was not the "right fit" for the shelter.

In addition to shelter access and support, Lidia was also denied legal recognition and retribution for the violence she had suffered. I accompanied Lidia to the Prosecutor's Office for crimes committed against migrants to submit her testimony of the rape. When recounting the details of her experience to the agent at the Prosecutor's Office, the agent became frustrated when Lidia was unable to recall the exact timeline from the moment of her arrival at the border to the time she entered the shelter, following the rape. Despite Lidia's obvious nervousness and welling tears, the agent brusquely informed her that she needed to concentrate and be completely honest, implying that her confusion raised suspicion of her testimony.

Given the circumstances, Lidia was anxious to continue her northbound journey. Rather that undergo the long wait for refugee case resolution, she then decided to apply for a humanitarian visa, which is specifically designed for migrants who have suffered violence and crime on Mexican soil. Despite undergoing the grueling process of submitting the official report of the rape, filed by the Prosecutors Office (and therefore concrete evidence of the crime), Lidia was ultimately denied the visa; the grounds for the denial were never made clear to her.

With limited recourse, she fled the migrant shelter to travel covertly to Oaxaca with a migrant man she had met in the shelter. After they were apprehended in Oaxaca by migration control agents, she was returned to the migrant detention center in Tapachula, but was then sent to the hospital for a severe urinary tract infection. Upon hospital release, because of her vulnerable condition, instead of being returned to the detention center, she ended up at the same migrant shelter where she first began her long trajectory. This time, the shelter reached an agreement with migration control agents essentially to incarcerate Lidia within shelter walls until one of her aunts arrived to take her home. What kind of home she would be going back to was no longer of interest to staff, and so she became a lost cause, shuffled from institution to institution until there was nowhere left for her to go. Her desperate attempt to flee brought her right back to where she had begun.

As Lidia's story demonstrates, narratives of acceptable forms of suffering and victimhood, as well their gendered performance, play a strong role in how migrant women are

able to access institutional resources and services. Lidia did not conform to the taken-for-granted and stereotypical assumptions about the outward, telltale signs of a worthy victim (e.g., timid, compliant, gracious). She was consistently labeled as "problematic" across institutional settings because of her "immoral" behavior (in the migrant shelter), ungracious attitude (described by the women's organization), and autonomous approach to mobility (which resulted in detainment by INM). In addition, as we see throughout the case study, access to opportunities and support for her desired migrant trajectory is consistently complicated by moral imperatives and the actual physical realities of her sexual and reproductive life. This began at the onset of her journey with the way that rumors about her supposed HIV status and then her dubious report of rape shaped judgments about her character throughout the migrant shelter. It arises again when staff members at the women's organization fail to acknowledge the role of Lidia's complicated feelings or the possibility of miscommunication about pregnancy termination in shaping her response to their encounter – what they go on to perceive as a rejection of their gracious support. Finally, because of pregnancy complications, she was sent back to the migrant shelter where she first began, rather than the migrant detention center, which ultimately led to her forced return to El Salvador. This final point is noteworthy because it demonstrates how additional, intersecting social identities, such as age, compound institutional inequalities.

Although Lidia was twenty years old, she was consistently infantilized by institutional actors, as if she did not know what was best for her own good. Despite her recounting of the abuse and neglect she endured in her natal home, the migrant shelter went directly against her wishes to reunite her with her family and facilitate what was essentially forced return migration – an invasive institutional intervention that is far from a rare or isolated incident. Indeed, Mexican refugee aid institutions have been criticized for prioritizing efforts to reunite unaccompanied

youth with their families in countries of origin over providing youth access to accurate information and asylum procedures (Doering-White 2018). This directly contributes to persistently low rates of asylum among youth[8] (Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2016). In 2015, for example, among the 77% of unaccompanied minors detained by INM who were deported, family reunification was frequently cited as the primary reason for deportation (ibid).

Lidia's story demonstrates a distinct mechanism of institutional violence through which migrant women are marked as unworthy of state or civil-society protection and are, therefore, once again made vulnerable to life without legal recourse. This includes denied access to institutional assistance and retribution for the suffering they have endured. However, opposed to absolute state omission (read: turning a blind eye), there is a secondary harm that is inflicted at an epistemic level, in which women's capacity as an informant, as a *giver of knowledge*, is questioned and ultimately debased (Fricker 2007). This results, first, in the denial of women's agency and fundamental human respect, in which women are "ousted from the role of participant in the co-operative exercise of the capacity for knowledge and recast in the role of the passive bystander" (Fricker 2007: 133). Secondly, and more perniciously, it serves to shift the blame of that denial onto the woman herself, reframing institutional support as a question of individual merit. As captured by Elena, a long-term human rights defender and women's psychologist in Tapachula:

> So many [refugees] have to prove their misery – 'prove to me that what you say actually happened to you, show me that you deserve it'. This whole idea of demonstrating deservingness is the most tragic because it's so ingrained in the institutional vocabulary...the whole system is constructed according to this logic. Like, "you want refugee status? Then earn it!" They have to put on a smile, be on their best behavior, but also show how much they are suffering in order to deserve assistance. But, how can you say that one has to earn it, like it's a test? It's a human right for god's sake! It's completely perverse!"

As Elena points out, there is a fundamental perversion within institutional practices

premised on humanitarian protection and support. A framework of testimonial injustice helps to explain how this occurs in practice: it is not only through acts of state omission that marginalized populations are made vulnerable, but also through the differential impact of institutional and legal policies that fail to address, or may even reinforce, driving roots of inequality (Galtung 1969; Farmer 2004; Fricker 2007). The consequences of these practices align with nationalist agendas of migration control that aim to immobilize women and deter their northbound migration. These processes are then further compounded by gendered assumptions and moral imperatives, particularly focused on women's sexual and reproductive lives, which tend to put additional constraints on women's autonomy to their bodies and their mobility.

I now turn to related yet distinct processes of epistemic and gendered injustices that occur within shelter walls.

Institutional Spaces: Once Women are In

In my research I found that while it is difficult enough for women to get through the door of aid institutions, access to aid alone was no guarantee that their situations would improve. On the contrary, in many cases, institutional interventions exacerbated women's conditions of vulnerability and risk through acts of emotional and psychological regulation, as well as a second form of epistemic harm, which Fricker describes as hermeneutic injustice.

The Materiality of Shelter Life and Physical Containment

Scholars have traced diverse emotional and psychological consequences of physical containment, ranging from the formation of new modes of coping and resilience (Lewis 2019) to an existential sense of being left behind by contemporary society (O'Neill 2014). I address these in more detail in Chapter Three. However, I think it pertinent here to describe the physical conditions of women's immobilization and containment within shelter walls, in order to

demonstrate how the material environment intersects with or compounds other processes of institutional violence and inequality.

The government-run shelter for women who have experienced inter-partner and familial violence is a case in point. The shelter imposes strict closed-door policies, which means that women are confined to the shelter walls (locked and guarded around the clock), until case resolution has been reached. For many women, this took months, including long, drawn-out periods of waiting weeks at a time for information about the status of their respective cases. Without the ability to seek out information on their own within government agencies and the difficulty of accessing information by phone, women had to rely on shelter workers or outside intermediaries for advocacy and communication with legal and justice systems. Under such circumstances, bureaucratic routines, shelter rules and long case delays not only fail to align with the realities of women's lives, but also become insidious tools of oppression in their own right.

The conditions of the shelter are so makeshift and rundown that instead of fostering any semblance of recovery and empowerment, they become sources of additional physical and, particularly, emotional distress. The faded white walls of the shared living space are marred by crayon scribbles and pencil marks. Nearly all of the upholstered chairs have large holes in the material or are missing cushions, limiting the sitting space. Over the several months that I spent in one shelter, the kitchen was nearly always in disarray with the rancid smell of un-emptied trash containers and dirty dishes overflowing from the sink. I believe that this was a result of a lack of consistent resources provided by the shelter (e.g., trash bags, dish detergent), as well as a reflection of women's conflicted relationship with the facility: although it was a temporary "home," women often described a range of negative emotional states generated by their surroundings, such as lethargy and insomnia, attributed to the penetrating heat and boredom that

filled their days; feeling out of control because of the lack of transparency and their restricted involvement in their own legal cases; and even ghostly encounters at night.

The shoddy physical environment of the shelter is exacerbated by its jail-like regulations, which transmit a sense of surveillance and punishment, rather than safety and protection. Women could only make phone calls in the presence of a shelter worker. They spent hours in bed or in front of the television with limited planned activities and were exposed to long periods of boredom (also see Chapter Three) and lack of stimulation with scarce resources for engaging their children in play and education. Women became especially frustrated when they noticed changes in their children's well-being or behavior. For instance, Jeni, a twenty-two year-old woman from El Salvador, attributed her young son's increased aggression and frequent outbursts to the unrelieved monotony of the women's shelter:

> …He can't take being locked up here any longer; it's too much for him. The only thing a child wants is to be free, running, playing; and here, he wakes up every day to see the same bare walls, all the same things…it's like he's at the end of his nerves and about to explode…It's like we are paying for what he [the aggressor] did…

Women recognize the paradox of "protection:" they are immobilized – or in women's own words, locked up (*encerrada*) – for their own "security" and face several obstacles to mobility after leaving the shelter (e.g., traveling with small children, lack of resources, anxiety and fear induced by trauma), while the aggressors seem to elude state control. Jeni often questioned the injustice of her derailed mobility, which she juxtaposed to the perceived hyper-mobility and impunity of her aggressors. "What kind of world do we live in? While here I am, locked in this shelter, he [her ex-boyfriend] is probably already far across the border in the US!" After six months in the shelter and little progress made, Jeni fled the shelter, abandoning her case for refugee status and risking detainment and deportation by attempting to travel north by her

own means. In addition, if women leave the state of Chiapas, the charges against their aggressor are dropped and the investigation, therefore, indefinitely suspended. By failing to comply with the conditions of their containment, women are deprived of both safe mobility and justice for the suffering they have endured, while increasing their own risks to personal safety and wellbeing.

Hermeneutical Injustice: Emotional Repression

When women demonstrated behaviors that did not align with dominant frameworks of appropriate gendered expectations, such as failing to comply with institutional regulations or expressing anger or conflict towards other women or their children (e.g., lack of patience, yelling at children, physical aggression), service providers tended to attribute such actions to individual factors, such as flaws in women's character or upbringing. There was rarely meaningful consideration of how women's current conditions may influence their emotions, interpersonal relations, or subjective identities. Nor was the broader context or the individual histories of women often taken into account.

Fricker asserts that the second form of epistemic injustice, hermeneutical injustice, occurs when people in positions of power have an unfair advantage in drawing upon collective understandings of social experiences that are already biased; the ability of the powerless to make sense of their own experiences is then constrained by the limited set of tools imposed by the dominant party, impeding important processes of recognition and legibility (to both self and others) of experiences of inequality and hardship. Such "hermeneutical darkness" creates profound barriers for women in reaching self-understanding and emotional healing, and may perpetuate negative cycles of emotional and psychological distress.

Such was the case of Betti, a twenty-year-old woman from Guatemala, who was kidnapped by her employers in a town near Tapachula. During her imprisonment in her

employers' home, she endured verbal, sexual, and physical abuse for over two years, including forced physical and sexual participation in satanic rituals. Her employers also tried to kidnap Betti's newborn; by bribing the midwife to register the newborn under their own names, they officially had legal custody over the child. After finally managing to escape with her baby from her kidnappers, Betti was placed in the non-government women's shelter, where she received pro-bono legal support to try to gain legal custody of the child.

However, due to what was described as insubordinate behavior and a conflictive personality, Betti was transferred from the non-government women's shelter to the government-run shelter for victims of domestic violence. This also meant a transfer of legal representation to a public attorney. Although Betti was able to argue successfully her case to gain custody of her child, the transfer resulted in significant case delays, extending her stay in the shelter for over seven months. During this time, and similar to Lidia's situation, shelter staff intentionally took measures to reunite Betti with her parents, including inviting them to visit Betti at the shelter without her explicit permission. This occurred even though Betti was over 18 years old, had been living independently for over three years, and had repeatedly conveyed to shelter staff that she experienced conditions of abuse and neglect in her natal household. Bettie failed to play the performative role of "correct victimhood" and, therefore, was pushed outside of the margins of the deserving migrant.

Within these sorts of institutional settings, gender is constantly under surveillance and policing, often by institutional workers, but also among women migrants themselves, which precludes important processes of healing and resists women's attempts to break constraints of gender expectations and norms. Betti often discussed how she left her hometown in Guatemala because she was sick of familial abuse and did not want to "wait around like her sister for a

prince to come save her." In the shelter, she was constantly met with resistance to her gender non-conforming affective behavior and "problematic" personality, which was described by staff as overly abrasive, unable to control her anger, aggressive towards other women, and in need of better parenting skills. As she described it:

> The psychologist told me that she doesn't believe they would have taken my child if I had a more motherly personality. But, I'm not just one of those cats that will bow her head and be timid and sweet. After everything I have lived through, I have to act hard so that what happened to me before, never happens again. How am I supposed to let go of this anger, after everything that I have experienced in the flesh over these past two years? *Siento todo lo que viví* [I feel everything that I have lived through].

Anger was a particularly problematic emotion for women to express; they were constantly being told by social service workers to "let go of their anger" and its "poisonous" effects. Such sanitizing discourse, fueled by gender norms about correct affective expression, too easily invalidates women's emotional experiences and may even perpetuate cycles of violence. One psychologist at the Fray Matías Center for Human Rights (CDH Fray Matías) with over ten years of experience working with women and GBV explained that the suppression of anger often results in women's displaced aggression towards their children, which then generates further self-blame and personal anger. "We really try to work with women to help them recognize the true targets of their anger, and to recognize that it's not only people in their families [who have hurt them]…but it's also the legal institutions that we have and that do nothing…your anger should be directed towards them, not towards your children." This is a good example of support for what is ordinarily suppressed in hermeneutic injustice.

Indeed, when women's anger over the suffering that they have experienced is not recognized or validated, it is often directed inward towards themselves or towards their children.

Fricker describes this as constituting a second-order or compounded harm, which impedes individuals from important processes of healing and self-realization: "Epistemic injustice wrongs someone in their capacity as a subject of knowledge, and thus in a capacity essential to human value… it can cramp self-development, so that a person may be quite literally prevented from becoming who they are."

Furthermore, as my research demonstrates, professionals' misinterpretation or lack of contextualization of women's anger may result in disciplinary measures that prolong – rather than remedy – immobility. This, in turn, increases the risk that women will vacate their petition for institutional assistance, while reinforcing dominant gender constructs of "appropriate" affect and behavior.

Institutional Denial: Pushing Women Out

A key dimension of inter-partner GBV is men's control over a woman's reproductive autonomy, which includes control over contraception, unintended pregnancy, rape, and the course of pregnancy (e.g., forced termination or induced miscarriage). International research has shown that GBV commonly begins for the first time or increases in severity during a women's pregnancy (Gartland et al. 2016; Campo 2015). Some attribute this to the man's perception of his partner's enhanced autonomy over her body, sexuality, and independence. "Since control is a significant aspect of domestic and family violence, violent or abusive men may find pregnancy threating and seek to re-exert control over their partners" (Campo 2015: 2). Attentiveness to the extent to which institutional responses address violence-induced negative or unwanted reproductive health outcomes, and the ways in which this occurs, provide another window into the underlying social logics and moral frameworks through which (poor, brown, migrant) women's lives are scrutinized and acted upon.

The prevalence of experiences with sexual violence among women migrants has been well documented and, sadly, is a highly predictable, and indeed often expected, outcome of the female migrant trajectory. It has been estimated that 60-80% of migrant women in transit in Mexico have experienced sexual violence (Fleury 2016). However, despite the pervasiveness of sexual violence, we have far less knowledge about the experiences of women who became pregnant as a result of rape. Rape-induced pregnancy was commonly reported among study participants, and a particularly powerful source of emotional distress and physical hardship for them. Maria, for instance, was kidnapped, raped, and then became pregnant when she was only twelve years old. She discussed the psychic weight of growing up with her son in her parents' home under the pretense that he was her younger brother. Another worried about how her son might be treated by neighbors or classmates if the truth of his origins were revealed. Other women described additional long-term consequences, such as loss of schooling and livelihood, familial disownment and abuse in response to their pregnancies, physical health problems, and challenges with intimacy.

Institutional Inertia and Epistemic Inequality

In response to the growing awareness of sexual violence along the southern Mexico border, in 2016, the state government of Chiapas passed a new law (NOM-046) that permits pregnancy termination if the pregnancy occurred as a result of rape and the gestation is at 12 weeks or less. The novelty of this law is that, as opposed to previous years, women are no longer required to produce a police report as evidence or any other official authorization beyond the women's given word. Enforcement, however, is uneven. In Tapachula women are denied this right through a combination of bureaucratic violence and epistemic injustice embedded in hospital practices and procedures.

Reina's story is a case in point. Reina, a forty-two-year-old woman from Nicaragua, worked as a *mesera*[9] (waitress who will have drinks and dance with men for a fee) in a local bar. One night after work she was kidnapped and raped by two men in a van. When she sought to terminate the pregnancy in the general hospital, she was presented with a series of bureaucratic obstacles and misinformation. For instance, even though she had filed an official police report (which, again, is not legally required), the lack of effective communication between the two institutions and the hospital's negligence in following mandated protocol led to Reina's discharge without ever having the procedure. She was fed a number of fabricated excuses, ranging from the lack of institutional authorization to a hospital rule against going into surgery with painted nails. Furthermore, during consultations with the hospital's psychologist, she was repeatedly pressed to withdraw her request, such as being asked if she really wanted to "assassinate her baby."

When I met Reina, I tried to advocate with hospital administrators on her behalf. However, by the time we were finally able to meet with the hospital's legal representative, her pregnancy had advanced to a point where, although still legally possible, her perception of the growth and development of the fetus had shifted and she could no longer justify to herself carrying out the abortion. She subsequently suffered pregnancy-related symptoms, such as nausea and severe lower back pain that led to job loss, financial decline, and increased anxiety and emotional distress. When I pressed hospital administrators to explain the reason for their negligence, they claimed ignorance of the law, even though Doctors without Borders had given an extensive seminar on health care responses to GBV at the hospital only a few months before the event. As reported by the director of the hospital's Sexual Violence Response team: "I don't understand why the hospital personnel doesn't have the right information…the doctors will say

to us, 'Well, she [the patient] first has to go to the Prosecutor's Office to file a complaint; if she doesn't file the complaint, we can't do a thing,' even though we know that's not the case."

When women like Reina encounter such obstacles, they have limited recourse for advocacy and assistance. The few non-government organizations that provide legal assistance are overwhelmed; some, like the UN agency for refugee assistance, only provide aid to people in the process of applying for asylum. In other cases, assistance is essentially denied because of presumptions about the women's character and her "deservingness." For example, when I reached out to the Nicaragua Consulate for support and aid in advocating on Reina's behalf, the Consulate representative was quick to remind me that Reina was a sex worker and repeatedly remarked on her lack of responsibility and laziness for not attending scheduled appointments.

Other women have reported similar experiences of abortion-related obstetric violence. One woman, who had settled in the city of Tuxtla Gutierrez, was interrogated under bright lights and shown vessels containing fetuses by hospital staff after she was admitted for a spontaneous abortion. She was so afraid that she was going to be detained following the event that she moved locations, losing her job and upending her current life, resulting in yet another form of displacement. Another migrant woman described the process of trying to obtain a legal abortion as much more traumatizing than the procedure itself.

Migrant women are differentially impacted by negligent and abusive treatment within healthcare institutes. Migrants are already hesitant to seek care at public facilities; this is compounded by stories and first-hand experiences of mistreatment among migrants by healthcare staff. Indeed, I often heard migrants express deep reluctance to seek hospital treatment and care, referring to the Tapachula General Hospital as "the hospital of death" ['*hospital del la muerte*'].

Furthermore, migrant women tend to lack the social and economic capital for taking alternative health care routes (e.g., private health care) compared to non-migrant communities. For example, according to an interview with a physician in Tapachula who provides private procedures of pregnancy termination, migrant women who have permanently settled in southern Mexico, and who may have broader social networks, frequently pull together the necessary resources to terminate the pregnancy in private settings. Migrant women in transit or who temporarily reside in Tapachula while seeking refugee status, rarely have access to such resources and networks.

Reina's case highlights the profound injustice of the state's failure to respond adequately to a highly predictable, and severely harmful, pattern of violence that disproportionately affects migrant women. Although Reina was never directly denied the abortion procedure, access to her right as a victim of GBV was so deeply hindered by bureaucratic incompetency and inertia that she eventually acquiesced to the insistence of hospital staff that she continue the pregnancy. However, as I have aimed to demonstrate throughout the chapter, this was not only the result of an act of state omission, an aversion of the state's gaze (Scheper-Hughes 1992), but also a productive form of power generated through interpersonal and communicative exchanges with institutional actors. This occurred, first, through testimonial injustice, in the way that Reina's testimony of violence was continuously challenged and downplayed by organizational workers based on their prejudices about her moral character and victimhood. Secondly, hermeneutical injustice was enacted by institutional actors through discourse that allowed only one myopic view of the social experience and meaning of pregnancy termination (e.g., referring to the fetus as a "baby" and abortion as "assassination), which denied Reina the wherewithal to engage and act upon an alternative interpretation.

Institutional Violence in the United States: Medical Negligence and Child Removal

In Menjivar and Walsh's (2017) discussion of institutional and legal violence experienced by migrant women, they emphasize that women's experiences of GBV are rarely defined by singular acts of aggression that only occur at a distinct stage of the journey (e.g., forced sex work in Honduras). Rather, women more commonly face a continuum of violence throughout the course of their trajectories. My research revealed similar findings, in which women's experiences were marked by distinct, yet overlapping, forms of physical, sexual, and institutional violence that occur at multiple stages of their trajectories, including arrival in the US.

Although the majority of the women with whom I spoke viewed residency in the United States as the ultimate goal in their seeking safety and protection, the violence they experience does not stop at the US-Mexico border. Following my participation in the migrant caravans, I maintained contact through social media and telephone with several women who were placed in US-based detention centers, for weeks and even months, after applying for asylum in the US. In reflecting upon their experiences in detention, some of them relayed that the legal and institutional violence they faced in the US was equally harmful, if not worse, than previous encounters.

Reports consistently document the poor conditions of detention centers where women are held, subjecting them to inadequate medical care, lack in sufficient nutrition, and overly rigid regulations, such as denying women the opportunity to rest during daytime hours (Voge 2019). Medical experts warn against the dangers of detention for women at any stage of pregnancy. Dr. Alan Shapiro, a pediatrician who founded an organization that works with undocumented children, states: "Detention in and of itself can be quite traumatizing and stressful, and anything

that triggers stress hormones can lead to negative outcomes in pregnancy for herself and for the fetus" (cited in(Bixby 2019). According to Bixby (2019), who conducted a government review of US medical records, 28 women have suffered miscarriages while held in detention from 2018-2019, nearly double the rates of the previous two years.

Maria, who is a thirty-two-year old woman from Honduras, whom I met on the Viacrucis migrant caravan, was detained in a migrant detention center in Texas for over six months while she was pregnant. She directly attributes the stress and institutional violence within the detention center for her pregnancy loss:

> The conditions in detention are precarious and there is a lot of racism. The medical attention is not adequate; you aren't given any additional alimentation; the psychological attention was not good when I lost my baby. I spent a lot of time with the psychologist, but instead of helping me feel better, I think I ended up worse off.…Yeah, detention [in the US] was the most painful part of my journey.

She went on to describe the emotional angst that many of her peers suffered when they were separated from their children.

> …When I was in detention, I met a lot of women who were separated from their families. I watched them cry for their children...and it's not like when the officials see you crying that they tell you everything is going to be okay; no, there, what they do when they see someone act depressed or not want to eat or get out of bed, what they do is move us to, I heard it call "the hole"[10], it's like a punishment…so us detainees…we tried to give them comfort, 'everything is going to be okay, have faith in god that you will be with your babies again'.

Between April and June of 2018 – the height of the "zero tolerance" policy initiated by the Trump administration – 2,648 children were separated from their parents (Gutierrez 2019). Although a federal judge ordered an injunction to halt family separations and reunite families in June 2018, children still remained in federal custody over a year later. Several hundred cases were complicated by the fact that the children's parents had been deported during the period of separation. Furthermore, even though family separations have been curbed, the US government

continues to impose conditions that increased risk of violence for women seeking asylum. Since the start of the "Remain in Mexico" program, there have been several documented cases of pregnant asylum seekers being sent back to Mexico, where they are forced to reside in poor and precarious conditions and with limited access to adequate health care.

This study demonstrates similar patterns of physical containment, bodily harm, and disrupted reproductive trajectories among migrant women in search of international protection. Child removal, and the widespread blame placed on mothers for bringing their children in the first place, adds another dimension of legal violence to the transnational arc of inequality that women experience throughout the course of their journeys. It is perhaps the most poignant and ironic case of legal violence identified by this study: women flee their countries to save their children and remain with their children, only to be stripped completely of those rights by the very institutions from which they seek protection. The scars of these abuses may persist for years, if not a lifetime, in the effects of traumatization suffered by these children, as well as in the trans-national conscience of the nation-states that permitted such violence to occur.

The Gendered Logics of Institutional Intervention and Resistance

Through the framework of institutional violence and epistemic injustice, this chapter demonstrates how institutional responses to GBV converge with nationalist agendas of migration control to create interwoven, systematic forms of social exclusion and immobilization among refugee women. It also illuminates the central role of gender norms and expectations in shaping differential access to and implementation of institutional intervention. While institutional practice is often portrayed as depersonalized and grounded in abstract principles of a monolithic state (e.g., Weber 1946), Lipsky asserts that policy aims are continuously reinforced, adjusted, or even remade by the actions and social biases of individual frontline bureaucratic actors: "The

decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures effectively *become* the public policies they carry out" (Lipsky 1980). An understanding of institutional responses to GBV, therefore, and the reproduction of gender-based inequality, requires close examination of the local, institutional *cultures* of practice: the routines, customs, contextual factors, and the key structuring social dimensions through which meaning is communicated and conveyed within institutional settings. Gender plays a particularly profound role in these dynamics.

Scholars have discussed extensively the gendered and gendering nature of social institutions, which through quotidian practices and interpersonal dynamics produce and reinforce the unequal distribution of power and resources between those who uphold normative gender ideals and those who transgress them (Connell 1997; Brown 1992). In many nation-states, such as Mexico, constructions of gender normativity, such as discourses of ideal motherhood or "correct" forms of female victimhood, are instrumental in creating a sense of differentially gendered citizenship and social belonging. By constructing refugee women as already "deviant" others who fail to conform to such standards, local institutional discourse and practice simultaneously reinforce hetero-normative nationalist ideals, while justifying actions that push women farther from the scope of inclusion.

Although some institutional interventions may help women meet basic life needs (food, accommodations, physical protection), the underlying wounds of gender-based violence are rarely adequately addressed. Interventions that fail to take into account structural forms of violence and inequality, promote myopic approaches to healing and recovery – shelter programs that emphasize psychological intervention that center on male inflicted violence, yet provide no real support or preparation to help women gain economic independence after leaving the shelter

walls. In the extreme, as demonstrated here, such approaches can justify immobilizing "protective" measures that effectively reproduce underlying processes of GBV through bodily alienation and a lack of control over reproductive and migratory trajectories. This also precludes the development and advocacy for alternative approaches to addressing women's needs (e.g., improved legal assistance, programming and funding support for transferring cases to safer locations, like Mexico City). As one visiting psychiatrist commented after working with migrants in the shelter in Tapachula*:* "Despite the importance of talking through past trauma, one of the greatest interventions that I can offer is the provision of information in relation to their present situations," for example, about requesting asylum and accessing community resources). "Debriefing," even when professionally assisted, is not enough; viable alternatives are critical complementary resources.

Negative institutional experiences may also influence future decisions about seeking institutional assistance in times of need. In my research, I found that women were often reluctant to seek free health insurance or report acts of violence, even though there are specific institutions and policies in place for migrants in need of such services. Such was the case for Fabiola, a forty-two-year-old Honduran woman who was raped by her landlord in UN-funded housing. After the event, instead of seeking assistance – the very type of protection the UNHCR purports to provide – Fabiola fled to Mexico City through her own means, risking subsequent encounters with violence and possible deportation.

Women's Agency and Resistance

This is not to say that women never exercised agency or resistance to deleterious institutional interventions. Throughout this chapter, I have focused on ways that institutions of refugee and migrant aid reproduce, rather than mitigate, durable cycles of GBV and inequality. However,

women are not passive bystanders in these processes; in my research, women frequently demonstrated diverse ways of resisting, coping with and transcending institutional limitations. I observed countless occasions, in which women took matters into their own hands to directly oppose institutional and legal restrictions. This included abandoning shelter accommodations, using informal networks to create opportunities for labor and mobility, traveling according to their own means (e.g., covertly or through unregulated channels, such as through the assistance of human traffickers), and engaging in illicit activity to increase their resources and opportunities (e.g., sex work, robbery). Unfortunately, such acts of agency often increased risk and vulnerability of women and were sometimes used to justify public victim blaming and stereotyping of migrant women.

In other cases, women drew upon solidarity and mutual support with other women to mitigate precarity and risk. Sometimes women who met in shelters formed alliances to provide mutual support beyond shelter walls. As soon as they were able to access humanitarian aid from ACNUR, they would share an apartment in order to maximize their resources and to assist one another in childcare, economic activities, and information sharing.

Women also leveraged their identities as women and mothers to engage and contest broader public and institutional narratives of vulnerability (feminine and otherwise) that undergirded institutional restrictions and practices. For example, in the 2017 migrant caravan, many of the migrant shelters and migrant aid organizations in Mexico signed a declaration in opposition to the migrant caravan. Their argument was largely premised on purported risks to women, children and unaccompanied minors, and other vulnerable populations, asserting that protection from violence, illness, and environmental hazards could not be guaranteed by the caravan movement. However, women paid little heed to such “warnings.” Instead, they formed

their own women's committee in the caravan through which needs and concerns could be communicated to movement organizers and then addressed through collaborative efforts between movement leadership and participant populations. Women also asserted agency through their participation in all-women protests that were organized at distinct points in time along the caravan journey, and through their visible and strategic presence in media and public appearances. For instance, during large protests in the migrant caravan, Sari and her daughter, who had used a wheelchair all of her life due to a congenital illness, nearly always led the march alongside a migrant man who carried the large wooden cross. Mariela, who began the caravan just one month after having her second child, frequently agreed to be interviewed by journalists covering the caravan movement, as well as media-based photos of her newborn swaddled in her arms. Instead of being pushed into the shadows of precarious migratory routes or beneath shelter walls, women became the poster children of the movement and continued to assert the power of their presence across transnational settings.

After the arrival of the caravan in Tijuana when caravan participants were denied entry at the US San Isidro port of entry, they initiated a nearly weeklong sit-in protest in a public lot in front of the port of entry building. Government and migrant aid organizations alike tried to convince caravan participants to leave the vicinity and abandon the protest. They pleaded with caravan participants to comply with ICE's request to wait patiently for an indeterminate amount of time until the processing center could accommodate additional asylum seekers. Similar to the arguments raised by migrant aid organizations in Mexico at the start of the caravan, institutions in Tijuana expressed explicit concern for the wellbeing of women, children, and vulnerable populations who would be forced to content with the hazardous weather conditions (e.g., cold temperatures, hard rain) and lack of personal safety.

Once again, institutional pleas were ignored. Caravan participants created a makeshift camp. Tents were raised; food and clothing came pouring in from various organizations and private donors; journalists from around the world arrived to document the movement. One migrant rights lawyer who had worked in Tijuana for over five years, attested that she had never witnessed a migrant sit-it of this magnitude; she perceived the protest as a direct response by caravan participants to the conditions of denied entry and forced waiting imposed by transnational government forces.

Migrant women with children were critical to these efforts. They drew upon shared understandings of social experience generated during the course of the migrant caravan trajectory, what Fricker (2007) describes as a "hermeneutical breakthrough," about the roots of social suffering and their own empowered positions. As one woman from Honduras reflected: "We've come all this way…nearly two months on the trains, sleeping in parks…what's one more week in such conditions?"

By banding together and asserting their collective voice, explicitly as mothers, the migrant women in the camp became the strongest force of resistance and, according to one coordinator, were the main reason the camp was not ultimately dissolved. He relayed:

> The mothers were the ones who said, '*We* are the moms; *we* know what's best for our kids; and we aren't going anywhere. We've come all the way on the trains, sleeping in parks, and we also know that it is in our children's best interest is to seek asylum in the United States…And essentially, all of the authorities who are trying to pressure them to leave are men, right? And so they basically had nothing to say to that and they shut up! And after there was a very intense confrontation where the mothers established that that was their perspective…they [the authorities] never came back (Pueblo Sin Fronteras coordinator, male, US).

In this chapter, I assert that the misinterpretation, or even blatant disregard, of women's lived realities by institutional frameworks of GBV not only limits the capacity for positive intervention, but also commonly leads to further victimization, be it through denial of services to

outright criminalization, particularly of women who fail to conform to standards of "correct" feminized victimhood and other gendered expectations. This either results in prolonging periods of immobility or by driving women to take alternative routes that often expose them to the same cycles of violence and precarity from which they have been trying to break free. This includes routes such as abandoning the case for refugee status, fleeing from women's shelters, clandestine travel, and returning to abusive or exploitative relationships. Honing in on the affective and embodied dimensions of women's experiences of institutional encounters, particularly related to moral, bodily, and emotional regulation, illuminates the subtle mechanisms of power and subordination that operate through seemingly benevolent interventions aimed to protect migrant women.

Practices within current refugee regimes are grounded in the conceptualization of refugee protection as an ethical imperative, rather than a legal obligation or essential human right (Derrida & Hallie). Due to the central role of gender in how ethical imperatives are structured, women experience distinct consequences of the moral undertows of refugee management. As long as such frameworks continue to drive refugee practices, uneven relations of power and oppressive gender ideologies will continue to persist. Therefore, as Safaoune (2017) has so eloquently remarked, the key to improving refugee management practices lies not in establishing a new ethical code, but rather in "unveiling the limits of the ethic itself." Perhaps women's anger is not the antidote, but its recognition and validation would certainly be a start.

Chapter 3

WAITING OUT THE CRISIS: IMMOBILITY AND AFFECT AMONG WOMEN MIGRANTS ON THE SOUTHERN MEXICO BORDER

When Coni, a twenty-seven-year-old young woman from Honduras, arrived at the southern border of Mexico to request asylum for the second time in the past two years, she imagined a successful outcome. Shortly after crossing the Suchiate River by raft and entering the border town of Ciudad Hidalgo, Coni was a victim of robbery and attempted rape. She figured that even if she were denied refugee status, she would at least be granted the twelve-month humanitarian visa, one given to migrants who have suffered in-country violence and crime, or for other humanitarian reasons. Even a temporary visa would make it worth the wait, she expressed, because she could settle somewhere in Mexico and begin to make a better life for herself, as well as her seven-year-old daughter, who remained behind. Perhaps it would even justify all of the hardships she had endured over the past two years: the chronic unemployment and economic instability; the sporadic trips to the psychologist; the months that pass without seeing her daughter; the long nights sleeping on concrete floors followed by recurring days of exhaustive lines and endless bureaucratic demands.

Several months later, Coni and I are sitting on upturned buckets outside of her simple cinder-block one-room house, chatting into the late afternoon. Beads of sweat collect at our brows from the sticky, tropical heat, and we make feeble attempts to swat away the flies. Coni, now pregnant, has been denied both asylum and the humanitarian visa, and she holds out hope for eventually gaining residency status through the birth of her unborn child. Suddenly the rain begins to come down, lightly at first until it becomes torrential. We abandon our buckets to find shelter under the stoop of her front door, and then gaze up at the darkening sky. The sound of

barking from the fenced-in front yard of her neighbor's house draws our attention to a medium-sized black and white dog that is running frantically in circles – but not in the playful way of a dog chasing its own tail for pleasure or exertion. Rather, this dog seems completely disoriented, apoplectic even, in its unsteady stride and incessant, almost desperate, circumvolution. Coni sighs with a slight shrug and a shake of her head, "*Pobrecito* (poor little guy)" she says, "Just like us migrants..." When I ask her to explain, she says that the unfortunate dog has gone blind and has become completely unhinged. All day he runs around in circles trying to find safe ground. "When I look at him, I can relate, because the same thing happens to us migrants. Here, it's like we are blind and we go round and around in circles trying to see the light, to find a place where we can feel safe."

Central American migrant women and their families who seek international protection along the southern Mexico border encounter long periods of unanticipated forced immobility as they undergo refugee case review. This process can take up to several months, or more, in conditions of protracted material resources and limited humanitarian aid. Women simultaneously struggle with a lack of familiarity of legal, healthcare, and social service systems in Mexico, which makes it difficult for them to meet the demands of everyday survival. In addition, they frequently contend with the heavy emotional, physical, and economic burden of recent and ongoing trauma (e.g., death of family members, personal experiences of violence, precipitous loss of home and livelihood). Prolonged periods of waiting under such conditions generate high levels of emotional distress among women, such as fear, anxiety, boredom, and the impotence of restricted physical mobility.

Throughout this chapter I take waiting, conceptualized as a form of "mundane emotional labor" (Thrift 2004), as a discrete unit of analysis to provide crucial insights into the gendered

and affective dimensions of women's encounters with the Mexican refugee regime. I argue that women's experiences of prolonged waiting are directly linked to institutional processes of power and subordination integral to refugee management. Furthermore, I demonstrate how gendered understandings of waiting profoundly, yet not uniformly shape how women subjectively interpret experiences of immobility and the actions they take to change their current situations.

Although experiences with waiting are often closely tied to process of im/mobility, an analytical approach to the relationshop between waiting and mobility has been "strangely absent from the current and burgeoning mobilities literature" (Bissell 2007) (for notable exceptions see: Crapanzano 1985; Hage 2009). It has also received scant attention within feminist scholarship (Colon 2011). Limited exploration of waiting within social sciences has been attributed to common assumptions that associate waiting with transient periods of inaction and a lack of agency (Auyero 2011). However, in contrast, I found that waiting, as a gendered and relational practice, is crucial to understanding processes of power and resistance that undergird mobility politics in contemporary global societies. It also helps to illuminate how gender hierarchies are both reinforced and challenged through practices of im/mobility in the social spaces of migrants' everyday lives.

Theorizing Affect, Gender, and Immobility

Numerous scholars have discussed how shifts in society – from the overhaul of a political system to technological advances in media production – form new modes of being in the world through the creation and mobilization of new affective registers (Thrift 2004; Mains 2007; Muehlebach 2013). O'Neill (2014), for example, shows how consistent patterns of boredom among the homeless in post-communist Romania reveal their alienation from urban life through practices of chronic under-consumption. Silvey (2007) in turn discusses the deployment of

emotional discourse about gendered piety in labor brokers' attempts to marshal Indonesia women's labor migration to Saudi Arabia. There has also been increased attention in sociological literature to how certain affective modes of expression are linked to broader processes of power and subordination, including specific strategies and techniques through which affect is mobilized to achieve political ends (Ahmed 2001; Povinelli 2004; Berlant 2011).

Despite the growing body of migration studies whose authors look more explicitly at the role of care and emotion in the geopolitical movement of migrants and their diverse social networks (Parreñas 2001b; Asakura 2013; Wendy Vogt 2016), few studies have homed in on the vagaries of everyday affect generated within specific geographies of power and temporal contexts. For example, only recently have scholars begun to recognize the importance of theorizing experiential dimensions of the liminal periods of rupture and stasis that frequently punctuate migrant trajectories (Willen 2012; Griffiths 2014; Frank-Vital 2020). Questions related to restricted mobility are most commonly approached from post-structuralist perspectives that emphasize theories of biopolitics, technologies of surveillance, and the policing of borders (Brettell 2015). Although foundational for understanding the shifting techniques of power and regulation that affect contemporary migration, such approaches fail to account for the more nuanced mechanisms through which political arrangements are interpreted, felt, and contested within the context of migrant lives. Furthermore, such analyses too often portray migrants as either powerless subjects overly determined by the push-pull factors of political-economic forces, or as highly agentive rational, risk-calculating actors whose paths are forged apart from the "messiness" of quotidian life (Silvey 2007). As a result, we know very little about experiences that fall between these polarized positions. In response, I advocate that attention to the affective dimensions of displacement offers an important entry point.

Several social scientists have called for increased attention to migrants' affective experiences of state processes of regulation in order to "unravel the complex linkages between migrant subjects and particular places, as these are shaped by changing economies, transnational linkages, and multiple collective identities" (Silvey 2007: 221). This is particularly important to the interrogation of seemingly mundane, bureaucratic procedures, which are often obscured by a discourse of impersonal neutrality and internal logics of efficiency and standardization. Highlighting the affective dimensions and consequences of bureaucratic processes can help to illuminate the social assumptions that undergird institutional practice and may be an important avenue towards demanding institutional accountability (Anderson and Smith 2001). In addition, a deliberate turn toward affect can loop back and thus contribute new insights into migrant agency and everyday politics, both with respect to individual resilience and larger social movements for migrant rights and collective action.

Gender plays a principal role in how emotions are produced, experienced and expressed. Throughout Latin America, gender ideologies, particularly related to notions of the suffering and self-sacrifice of motherhood, are intimately intertwined with broader structures of inequality, such as disparities in access to healthcare, education, and labor opportunities (Martin-Baro 1995; Cecilia Menjivar 2011; Crowley-Matoka 2016). For many women who face overlapping forms of marginalization in society, gendered expectations that undergird idealized forms of motherhood and may enhance women's status in society, also become sources of incalculable pain and vulnerability. For example, in Menjivar's (2012) study on Maya women in Eastern Guatemala, she found that pervasive notions about the sacrifice of motherhood and the need for women to always think of their children before themselves buffered the tendency of women to endure domestic violence in the home. Furthermore, when they were unable to meet expectations

of venerated motherhood, generally due to limited access to vital resources and services, they tended to blame themselves, thereby internalizing broader structures of inequality and violence.

Similarly, my research reveals ways that experiences of waiting are shaped by gendered expectations and ideologies: from the way that fear of violence delineates women's spatial boundaries in Tapachula, to the discourses of sacrificial motherhood through which women justify institutional marginalization. However, even though gendered constructs often compound distinct vulnerabilities that women contend with during periods of prolonged immobility, I found that they might also buffer pathways of coping and resilience. Ironically, even while forced waiting generates a sense of existential turmoil for women, in some cases, they are also able to integrate perceptions of waiting into positive life narratives, such as self-realization and empowerment. This opens up new questions for how asylum processes may coincide with broader feminist projects and emergent forms of collective identity. A feminist perspective that recognizes how gender operates on the level of affect and within specific cultural logics is crucial to understanding how intimate forms of human experience are linked to broader processes of power and governance integral to emergent citizenship regimes.

Waiting Out the Crisis

As studies on affect demonstrate, emotions constitute an important set of relations through which social worlds are constituted and mediated (Thrift 2004; Stoler 2007). Throughout this chapter, affect is distinguished from emotions in that emotions are personal and biographical, whereas affect is felt, produced, and performed at the interface between the personal and the social (Silvey 2007). It is a specific, profound way of knowing and relating to the world that is generated through the broad circulation of public feelings, yet is felt in intimate ways, too. Stewart asserts that affective states are "not exactly 'personal' but they sure can pull

the subject into places it didn't exactly 'intend' to go" (2007). Affect, therefore, is derived beyond an internal state; it is projected socially, and is performative in nature. Yet, as a set of non-reflective embodied practices, it often compels us to move and be moved in particular ways that lie below conscious awareness (Thrift 2004; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987).

Through the exploration of the lived experiences of waiting among asylum-seekers in Tapachula, this chapter calls attention to the corporeal, affective, and gendered dimensions of imposed immobility in spaces of extreme precarity. I ask: How do perceptions of life projects shift when the spaces one inhabits become devoid of purpose amidst the duress of mounting uncertainty? Mains (2007), in his analysis of experiences of unemployment and boredom among young men in Ethiopia, demonstrates how social expectations about what constitutes the good life are inextricable from how both space and time are perceived. The mismatch between one's aspirations for the future and the present conditions of physical and economic immobility cause time to take on a more expansive quality in ways that shift how one inhabits the social world and conceptualizes his or her role within it. Among migrants awaiting a decree of asylum or other forms of legal status, the oppressive force of time is particularly pronounced. The extensive waits and convoluted bureaucratic procedures paired with long days of unemployment, boredom, familial separation, and uncertainty of the future engender a profound sense of being existentially stuck in place.

According to Hage (2009), a viable life is marked by a quest for imagined mobility: that is a sense of "going somewhere." People migrate not only in response to immediate harm, but also because their existential sense of self is threatened and they seek a suitable location in which they can once again strive towards the good life. When this affective disposition becomes stalled or disrupted one becomes vulnerable to being overtaken by feelings of boredom,

meaninglessness, loss of purpose, or stalled life narratives. For Hage (2009), the quality and pervasiveness of the affective state of being stuck in place is directly related to the nature and management of modern crises generated by political and economic forces within capitalist societies. Appadurai has made similar observations, noting that: "The paradox of patience in the face of emergency has become a big feature of the world of globalization as the poor experience it. The world as a whole operates increasingly in the mode of urgency, of emergency, of dangers that require immediate reaction and attention. Yet, their (the poor's) biggest weapon is often their patience…for bureaucrats to deliver promises" (2001: 86-87).

The affective experience of waiting in profound uncertainty, paired with physical stasis, has proliferated, intensified, and become normalized through modern neo-liberal techniques embedded in crisis management. One need only think of refugee camps across the world, where one may reside for decades or, even a lifetime, to realize this. It is also at the heart of ontological struggles over how crises are interpreted and lived. In Hage's words, it marks a "struggle between two realities…or as Bourdieu would put it, a struggle over the making and unmaking of the social world" (2015: 3). Hage draws on hallmark studies of the queue and social order by Badiou (2008) and Sartre (1960) to point to radical transitions in the affective nature of crisis: whereas once the crisis of immobility generated by the stalled queue would have triggered social upheaval and a rethinking of social arrangements, today, enduring the crisis is expected and valorized as a sign of good citizenship and civilized self-restraint. "Even when the bus does not come, even when people are feeling stuck in a queue that is not moving, they heroically keep on queuing…And far from being perceived as cowardly, to remain 'inactive' and non-revolutionary in the face of crisis, to 'wait out' the crisis is perceived as something that one is proud to do" (Hage 2015: 6).

Migrants' perceptions of waiting through periods of forced immobility along the southern Mexico border mark a particular engagement with an expanding transnational regime of refugee crisis management. Pushed out of or fleeing their countries by pervasive violence, shrinking economic opportunities, and the failure of the state to protect and provide for its inhabitants, migrant men, women, and children find themselves in ongoing conditions of displacement and precarity, with limited possibilities of integration into local economies. The hope of respite, the promised (however fictive) rewards of exercising patience amidst the urgency of crisis, persuades migrants to meet the state's request for compliance and social order. But as the days give way to months or longer, as the material demands of daily survival begin to mount while institutional support is stalled or abruptly withdrawn, migrants find themselves in a captive state of waiting without surcease. It is not merely an experience of boredom and of having nothing to do, but the sense of being trapped in precarious conditions and, in turn, plagued by associated anxiety, fear, and stalled life plans. Furthermore, this predicament is an affective state actively produced, sustained, and policed through refugee practices and policies, revealing the crucial role of emotional regulation in the geopolitics of migrant management.

Refugee Crisis Management along the Southern Mexico Border

Refugee crisis management is structured by a complex regime of specialized politico-legal procedures within national migration policy and international humanitarian infrastructure. As I described in the introduction, important shifts in contemporary refugee policy, which are occurring on a global scale, are reshaping how migrant populations are being managed in what have traditionally been considered transit countries, or those countries that migrants must pass through to reach popular destination countries in the global North, like the US or the EU (Mountz 2011; Hyndman and Giles 2011; Üstübici 2016). In response to external pressure from

destination countries to curb onward movement, transit countries have assumed a greater role in the retention, organization, and deterrence of prospective refugee populations, what Hyndman and Giles describe as a "shifting, not a sharing, of responsibility" for refugee populations (2011: 361). Such measures that have significantly altered outcomes of migratory trajectories, such as increased rates deportation from transit countries or permanent resettlement within these countries.

Although the externalization of refugee policies has been occurring within Europe since the late 1990's (Spijkerboer 2017), it is a more recent phenomenon in the Americas. Indeed, it was not until the early 2000's that Mexico began to implement significant changes in migration policy and programming, largely in response to US demands on the Mexican government to control the swell of Central American migrants arriving at its southern border. Increased pressure on the refugee systems in both countries can also be attributed to a lack of alternative opportunities. With the absence of short and long-term labor programs that once existed in the US in the mid- to late-20th century, asylum is now one of the only legitimate forms of entry into the US for Central American populations.

Within the context of the externalization and professionalization of refugee management, asylum-seekers are increasingly viewed as a bureaucratic problem that must be regulated and controlled through proper institutional procedures. Those who take their own initiative to arrive at destination countries to make asylum claims via their own resources and modes of mobility, rather than being filtered through official refugee channels, are perceived as an aberration of bureaucratic order and a threat to national security (Mountz 2011: 382).

As migrants are punted from one bureaucratic channel to the next in their attempts to request asylum, they often get stuck in southern border cities. This occurs through various

processes, which include outright denial of asylum, cumbersome or incoherent bureaucratic procedures, or, on an interpersonal level, by the lack of resources, social support, or will to continue the northbound journey. Without any effective means of social integration, in one of the most impoverished states in Mexico, those who reside in border cities end up fueling a work force of exploitable and disposable labor. They find themselves in spaces of abandonment, confined by the conditions of a continuum of physical and structural violence. As one activist who has been working in the region for over ten years has noted:

> People are trapped here in Tapachula under very precarious conditions, living in overcrowded housing in which two or three families may share one apartment because they all have to save to get by – to buy diapers, milk for their kids, daily meals. All of this, well, it's killing people here, endemically. There's so much suffering… Here, there is no space for people to rebuild (their lives and identities), as Hondurans, Salvadorans, or to live peacefully. They are always under the pressure of idleness or working exploitative jobs. It's retention, a way to retain migrants at whatever cost, like a super migratory prison, Tapachula.

As the refugee regime gains a stronger foothold in migration management and governance along the southern Mexico border, on-the-ground dynamics shifts dramatically, marked by a deliberate strategy of delaying and deterring migrants' arrival at the US border.[11] Even though the number of deportations from Mexico's southern border skyrocketed beginning in 2013 (from 86,298 in 2013 to 147,370 in 2016), along with asylum petitions, apprehensions along the US border remained remarkably consistent (414,397 in 2013 and 408,870 in 2016) (see Table 2). Opposed to the heavy-handed security approach of detainment and deportation, the inner-workings of power within refugee regimes are harder to identify and describe. It is in the very disruption of mobility, and the affective experiences generated through prolonged periods of waiting, through which new mechanisms of power and governance operate.

Bodies in Suspension: the violence of waiting through spaces of immobility

In *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu asserts that: "Making people wait…delaying without

destroying hope…adjourning without totally disappointing…is an integral part of the exercise of power" (Bourdieu 2000). Long periods of waiting are central to the institutional management of the refugee crisis along the southern Mexico border. In this context, emotional regulation has become a medium through which states use temporal and spatial ambiguity against asylum-seekers; it is also a constitutive element of a particular form of structural paralysis that locks people into distinct spaces of precarity in which basic needs go unmet and fundamental human rights are suspended, such as the right to move freely, to work, and to educate their children. Although invariably linked to broader global processes, it is a mechanism of power deeply embedded in the local institutional landscape, and in the quotidian practices and interpersonal relations that typify borderland life; furthermore, it tends to operate at a level of consciousness that lies below reflective awareness. As Thrift explains, "…There are many 'hidden injuries' in the systems that we inhabit and equally, all manner of proto-political longings to change our situation that we cannot necessarily articulate but which drive us along…" (2004: 69).

One's success in being granted refugee status is equated with one's ability to wait out the crisis through compliance with bureaucratic stipulations. Auyero describes such phenomena as a "people changing operation" in which collectively shared emotions are generated through routinized institutional encounters (2011). In his study among poor women in Buenos Aires, for example, he finds that recurrent exposure to lengthy waits and burdensome regulations in welfare offices mold subjectivities of dependency and subordination. Goffman has made similar assertions about "asylums" as total institutions: "the forcing houses for changing people" (Goffman 1961). In the case of refugee women along the southern Mexico border, it is not only institutional demands, but also the very conditions of the border, itself, that structure the power-sculpting effect of affective experience.

Among refugee women, affective perceptions of waiting are strongly linked to restrictions over physical movement – as aspect of waiting that is often assumed but rarely interrogated within sociological analyses. Hage (2009), for example, discusses existential immobility in terms of bodily movement, yet he fails to flesh out the specific ways in which it is embodied as a mode of being-in-the-world and to relating to others. Yet as Willen (2007) demonstrates in her phenomenological take on "illegality," tracing the effects of interactions with state institutions on how migrants move through and inhabit space illuminates important links between "somatic modes of attention" and deeply rooted political arrangements (Csordas: 1993) or more specifically, in this case, how refugee policies are mediated and made legible through embodied, psycho-sensorial experiences of waiting.

Women in Tapachula frequently describe feelings of being "trapped" (*atrapada*) or "incarcerated" (*encerrada*) in a city with "no way out" (*sin salida*). They arrive in Tapachula seeking refuge, a sense of respite, but find themselves in equally precarious or worse conditions, sometimes facing the same cycles of violence and poverty from which they fled in their countries of origin. Requests to have asylum cases reviewed in another perhaps safer Mexican state (*traslado*) are routinely denied. While they await adjudication of their case for refugee status, women are completely dependent on humanitarian aid. Although ACNUR provides assistance for housing[12] and alimentation for up to three months, it is not enough to meet the demands of quotidian life. Furthermore, assistance ends as soon as migrants receive case resolution, leaving migrants responsible for all costs of living, in addition to expenses required to complete the refugee application process (e.g., copies of paperwork, required photos, transportation to government offices, etc.) and to secure transportation to their final destination. Women's trajectories are often delayed for months by their inability to save enough money to transport

their families to the northern border. Except in extreme cases, there is essentially no humanitarian assistance available to aid migrants with travel expenses, nor are there programs to help migrants integrate into the local economy.[13]

Elvira's situation is a case in point.

> Elvira is a forty-three-year-old Salvadoran women whom I met at a faith-based migrant aid organization in Tapachula. At the time, she was living in a single room at the organization facility with her husband and two youngest children. Her mother, three other children and two grandchildren lived in a separate location. In El Salvador, Elvira and her husband were extorted by gangs, who also tried to forcefully recruit her adolescent children. When they failed to comply with these demands, gang members attempted to murder her husband and son. Elvira had arrived in Tapachula a few months prior to the rest of the family in order to assess their options for seeking international protection. As a result of her early arrival, she applied for refugee status separately from the rest of the family. Despite their shared circumstances, and even though the entire rest of her family was accepted for refugee status, Elvira was twice denied.
>
> At the time of our meeting, Elvira and her family had been living in Tapachula for over a year, wrapped up in a long bureaucratic battle to secure legal documents for Elvira so that they could continue the northbound journey. Shortly before we met, she had finally been granted a non-renewable, five-month travel permit. However, after living in Tapachula for such an extensive period, they were struggling to find enough money to make the trek. Elvira sold coffee and sweets in the street, but only brought in around $75 MX (about $3 USD) per day, barely enough to feed a family of four. Her husband and sons had trouble finding consistent work because of discrimination by local employers; the only work her daughter was offered was in a bar where she would be obligated to drink with clients. The little money that they had went towards meeting the costs of insulin for her diabetic mother, as well as necessary medical treatment for her son, who continued to experience sequelae from the gunshot wounds he sustained in El Salvador. Elvira longed to get her daughter into school, but had to prioritize the family's health over the expenses for school materials and uniforms.
> Their economic activity was further limited by fear of being identified and pursued by gang members from El Salvador who had arrived Tapachula. In some cases, gang members cross the border in attempts to flee themselves. However, in other cases, they arrive with explicit intentions to hunt people down and expand gang control in neighboring regions. Despite the circumstances, even the suspicion of being pursued by a gang member across borders is enough to provoke destabilizing fear and re-traumatization. Indeed, after recognizing a gang member from his hometown in Tapachula's Central Plaza, Elvira's son (the one who had experienced attempted murder) struggled to leave the house out of fear.

> "He doesn't want go to work," she relayed. "He's scared. It's been hard for him to get past the trauma" [*ha costado mucho salir de ese trauma*].
>
> Elvira relays that Tapachula is not a place where they want to resettle, emphasizing the insecurity of the region. She longs for her family to arrive in Tijuana, or somewhere along the northern Mexico border, where the pay is much better and her children may have the opportunity to continue their studies. But in order to achieve this, they may have to consider splitting up the family: her and her eldest daughter first making the trek to Tijuana until they can save enough money to cover the transportation costs of the rest of the family.

As Elvira's case demonstrates, women and their families face a confluence of social and economic inequalities that create a perfect storm of immobilization along the southern border. During these periods of physical stasis, women barely find the means for basic survival, let alone any real form of social integration, while also contending with the mounting existential aguish of entrapment. As time progresses, the cumulative weight of immobility becomes more difficult to bear.

Indeed, the longer she and her family are stuck in Tapachula, the more they struggle to manage the demands of daily needs and realities, such as generating sufficient resources to cover basic costs of living and to address chronic and acute health problems. In addition, Elvira must endure with the emotional agony of watching her children's lives put on pause, including the potential long-term implications of unaddressed health problems, chronic stress caused by fear and anxiety, and delayed schooling. This creates a deep sense of emotional distress. Elvira's aspirations move her towards a futurity far away from Tapachula, while her ability to pursue that futurity remains limited by socio-economic, psychological, and health-related drivers of physical immobility. As a result, she and her family must begin to consider nearly impossible decisions about dividing the family up to make separate journeys north.

As typified by Elvira's story, over time, as the weeks turn into months, women become exhausted by the impotence of inertia, such as the inability to send money back to their children

who remain behind or to continue their trajectories north to seek better opportunities. They commonly must turn to other forms of sustenance to make ends meet, ranging from begging for money in the streets to soliciting assistance from distant relatives in the US, processes that degrade women's sense of autonomy and self-respect. As Yessica, a twenty-three-year-old from Honduras, remarked: "There is nothing that I can do…I feel like such a burden on my mother, on ACNUR. I can't fend for myself; I can't give my children the life they deserve." Women must test the limitations of their own perseverance until they reach a point of exhaustion, at which point they must accept the terms of subordination or withdraw altogether – what Povinelli refers to as "the violence of enervation" (Povinelli 2011: 132).

Take the case of Maria, for example, a forty-six-year-old woman from Honduras who left three children behind. When she was denied refugee status for the first time, she decided to forego the option to have her case re-reviewed, which would take an additional 4-6 months. "My little girl is getting ready to start classes. She needs money for uniforms, books. Here, I can't make a dime." Instead, Maria was able to petition successfully for a humanitarian visa. Although the visa will allow her to travel north, when it expires in 6 months, it will leave her in legal limbo and with the potential to be deported at any moment if detained.

Enervation is not the only species of violence, however, that shapes women's feelings of confinement. Similar to Elvira's son, women experience profound feelings of insecurity and fear of potential perpetrators (including gang members, INM authorities, and people in the local community), which have a substantial impact on how, when, and where they move throughout the city. Women often discuss how infrequently they leave the house due to perceptions of personal insecurity. Many have had experiences with violence and crime in Tapachula and the surrounding region, including rape, robbery, kidnapping, death threats, police violence, and

murders of family members. Women comment on the growing presence of ex-gang members in Tapachula and the fear of encountering an abusive husband or former rapist in public places. Stories circulate broadly throughout migrant communities about organized crime in Tapachula, such as the kidnapping of small children for organ trafficking or the sex trade. Even women's nighttime hours are infiltrated by the emotional turmoil of past trauma and present-day anxieties of violence and bodily harm, which manifest in recurrent nightmares, insomnia, restless sleep, and ghostly premonitions. However, if they leave Tapachula, they risk refugee case abandonment and grounds for detainment and deportation by INM agents.

Consequently, women spend the vast majority of their time residing within the plastered cinder-block walls of their precarious homes and beneath the laminated tin roofs that draw in the blistering heat of the day, amounting to what one activist described as "psychological torture." As Sandra, a forty-three-year-old woman from Honduras, remarked about daily life in Tapachula after she was raped by her current landlord: "One day I saw him [the aggressor] and everything came back to me…so now we stay locked inside the apartment all day, out of desperation. And if we have to go out, we go very quickly and we always take taxis… The days are long, so long. In the morning, I get up for breakfast and then lay back down in bed. Later, I get back up to make lunch, and then it's back to bed."

Anxieties about personal safety significantly alter the lived experience of immobility and have important implications for how uneven relations of power and exclusion are reproduced over time. Fear of moving freely through the city affects women's abilities to integrate into the community and to access various resources and services, such as civil protection and medical care. It also works to secure specific relationships of power between both individual bodies and the body politic through corporeal movement and signification (Ahmed 2004). For example,

when Sandra was raped by her landlord, the fear that took hold of her and spurred her to action – the panic, the racing heart, the uncontrollable grief – was not only anchored to the violence of an individual man in a society of uneven gender relations, but was also produced by and was productive of a specific relationship to the state.

As a newly arrived migrant woman with limited ability to navigate the criminal justice system in a country rife with state impunity of gender-based violence, Sandra fled Tapachula, abandoning her case for refugee status in exchange for self-preservation through unauthorized mobility. Yet, by doing so, she exposed her vulnerability – "a particular kind of bodily relation to the world" – which itself is "read as a site of potential danger" (Ahmed 2004: 69). Fear, therefore, is crucial to the politics of mobility and processes of social differentiation by shrinking the spaces in which women are able to freely inhabit and move through. In addition to physical isolation, it also impedes important processes of generating support and solidarity with others (including with staff in aid organizations), by driving wedges of mistrust and suspicion within social relations and networks (Green 2009).

Hyndman and Giles (2011), among others, have discussed how refugee programs that aim to restrain migrants away from destination countries depend on opposing representations of the threatening, mobile migrant who travels through on his or her own terms, and the "authentic" refugee who patiently waits. Affective experience plays a key role in how this complex system of "social sorting" is constituted, a system that effectively steers differential access to resources and social inclusion (Povinelli 2011), with profound material and embodied consequences. When women are encouraged to comply with the socio-affective disposition of the patient, docile, and grateful recipients of aid, those who fall outside of the assigned terms of engagement and are unable or unwilling to meet institutional demands are socially marked as deviant and

undeserving. They must then resort to alternative routes of action, which entail varying levels of risk, including fleeing the protection of shelters, engaging in risky employment (such as working as a *mesera* in a local bar), traveling through irregular means, and abandoning altogether the petition for refugee status. This is not to say that those who comply are without agency, but rather to argue that the way agency is exercised is differentially affected by the ideological and political formations espoused within the refugee regime.

Ambiguous Agency

Sacrificial Motherhood

Experiences of waiting, as a subjective and embodied condition, spur migrants to take various measures to cope with their current situations. For others, it becomes integral to how they rationalize imposed stasis by finding meaning in the temporary relinquishment of control as a means towards a better future. If immobility is a space of constrained agency and existential angst, what meanings do women attribute to these experiences to make sense of their struggles and to foster resilience? What do the performance and interpretation of affective dimensions of waiting reveal about the politics of crisis management and the integral role of gender in reproducing relations of power?

Migrant women often discuss weathering the hardships of waiting for asylum as a necessary sacrifice that one must endure in order to achieve the desired outcome. Receiving refugee status is equated with a sense of merit: to be a "good refugee" relies on one's ability to be patient, dutiful, and complaint clients of an arbitrary, yet orderly, bureaucratic system, in order to prove one's deservingness of refugee status. This perception is reinforced through institutional discourse and practices integral to refugee management. As a psychologist and migrant rights activist who has worked in the region for several years commented:

> In the refugee system, migrants have to prove that they are deserving. This idea of being deserving is the most tragic part because it's so integral to the institutional vocabulary…of COMAR, of ACNUR. But deserving? Come on! It's their right, their human right. But the institutions are like, "Do you want a life without violence? Then work for it! Wait for it." And the whole refugee system functions in this way, like an award that one must win. You have to go to COMAR each week, show good behavior, you can't miss an appointment…it's all a big test and the whole system has been constructed according to this logic.

Many women are able to situate life projects within institutional discourse of merit and worth through a framework of gendered morality that draws on notions of sacrificial motherhood and feminized notions of patience. Women commonly justify their decisions to undergo the refugee process in terms of fulfilling the needs and best interests of their children. As one migrant woman, Alejandra, expressed, "If not for Alex [her three-year old son], I'd be on *la bestia*[14] in an instant, *pa' arriba* (heading north) [to the US]. But it's too dangerous for a child, there are too many risks…so here I am." Patience is perceived as a virtue, a sign of the suffering and emotional labor one must endure for her children.

Cultural logics of motherhood and patience are also reproduced through gendered structural formations within refugee policy that reward women with children. For example, children offer women distinct life possibilities denied male migrants, such as the prioritization of women with children to certain resources, such as shelter and food, and the ability to gain residency status, even if denied asylum, through the birth of a child on Mexican soil[15].

However, internalized notions of patience and sacrifice come at a high emotional cost for women awaiting asylum. In many cases women have fled situations of gender-based violence and carry long-standing physical and psychic wounds of familial and intimate partner violence that may go back generations. Many have had to leave their children behind in order to break the cycle of violence that they have experienced in their families by seeking the means for a better future (through remittances sent back to their children or the eventual retrieval of children to

places of settlement). Among those who have children with them, women constantly worry about how their own emotions might affect their children's wellbeing and therefore adamantly self-regulate the external expression of their own internal emotions. When they see physical or behavioral changes in their children or are unable to protect them from harm or to provide for them in a way that they deem adequate, they experience strong feelings of guilt and impotence in their inability to change the current situation and a strong sense of failure to complete maternal duties of social reproduction.

Felicia, the thirty-eight-year-old Salvadoran woman whom I introduced in Chapter One, is a prime example of how notions of "sacrificial motherhood" are leveraged in constituting the "good refugee."

> Felicia suffered years of domestic abuse by her husband in Honduras, but she never left the marriage for the sake of her children. It was not until her oldest son's life was in danger after he witnessed the gang murder of a fellow classmate that Felicia decided to leave her husband and home in order to flee the country with her three sons.
>
> Felicia was first introduced to me by staff at one of the migrant shelters. She was the embodiment of maternal values and spiritual fortitude: she often wore long skirts and buttoned-up blouses; she had a soft voice and spoke articulately and in an educated manner; she often referenced God and religion when she spoke; and she discussed in detail the great lengths that she had gone through, and the extreme efforts that she continued to exert, to keep her children out of harm's way.
>
> Felicia complied with the recommendation of migrant aid institutions every step of the way during the process of applying for refugee status. For months, she and her family resided in a closed-door, clandestine migrant shelter for particularly vulnerable cases of migrant families, even though the shelter felt like a prison. After her eldest son was murdered in a town near Tapachula, where they had temporarily resettled to wait out the remaining months ahead, Felicia agreed to move into a makeshift refuge for protected witnesses in the Prosecutor's Office in Tapachula for the protection of her family. They stayed there for weeks, despite lacking access to a private bathroom or kitchen, and even though Felicia herself intuited ulterior motives. One day, when I visited her at the Prosecutor's Office, she pulled me aside and confided, in a hushed whisper, that the Prosecutor needed her testimony to advance their case against suspected gang members; if she left

the state, her individual case would be dropped and her testimony nullified.

> During the last several weeks in Tapachula, Felicia requested assistance from ACNUR to secure safe, legal transportation for her and her family to the northern Mexico border. With good reason, Felicia no longer felt safe residing in Mexico and desired to seek asylum in the United States. Despite the extenuating circumstances, ACNUR only agreed to facilitate transportation to Mexico City. It was not until Felicia and her two remaining sons made it to Tijuana by their own means, and relocated to Los Angeles to wait their asylum hearing, that Felicia finally felt a sense of safety and respite.

Over the several months that Felicia and her sons resided in Tapachula, Felicia complied with every institutional request and recommendation to safeguard the safety and wellbeing of her vulnerable children. However, time after time, she found herself trapped in a bureaucratic web that pitted her sense of responsibility for her family's safety against the very measures that might have made an actual difference in her ability to protect them (e.g., case transfer to a northern Mexico state). Furthermore, despite the failures of purported institutional protection, she would always carry the weight of her son's death on her shoulders. I could see this as she recounted to me the testimony of a witness of her son's death, who described how he had called out for his mother in his last moments of life.

As Felicia's tragic loss illustrates, there is a dark underbelly of the way that gendered, cultural technologies are leveraged towards achieving refugee compliance, particularly for women who bare the burden of sacrificial motherhood in a state that reveres, yet cannot uphold, motherly acts of protection.

Challenges to Gender Hierarchies

Through narratives of sacrificial motherhood, gendered power relations are constructed and reproduced. However, such multi-factorial, deeply cultural processes are never uniformly experienced. Notions of merit and sacrifice may also be operationalized in ways that challenged dominant gender hierarchies. For example, in order to cope with and make sense of the

emotional struggles generated throughout the asylum process, women commonly appeal to everyday religious ideas and expressions that shift the emotional burden of uncertainty into the hands God (*si Dios me permite*) [if God wills it]. A powerful religious-inflected sentiment that circulates widely among migrant women is that their suffering will eventually be rewarded; migration is a "test" of faith, which they must endure in order to transcend life's hardships. This often serves to align perceptions of waiting with a sense of personal fulfillment and empowerment, which could be interpreted as a feminist project framed in religious discourse. Women find a sense of pride in taking the initiative to seek asylum and in their capacity to brave the conditions of prolonged waiting in order to reach long-term objectives.

I return to the case of Sandra, for example, the forty-three-year-old woman from Honduras who was raped by her landlord in Tapachula while awaiting refugee case adjudication. Sandra fled Honduras because of extortion and death threats by gangs. However, she also experienced years of verbal and physical abuse by her ex-husband, followed by the trauma of sexual violence that occurred in Tapachula. Even though she initially abandoned her refugee case in Tapachula, when she fled the city in a panic after she was raped, she was able to reinstate her application in Mexico City with the help of a local shelter for migrant women. After several months in the shelter, where she also received counseling support and economic assistance, she was eventually granted refugee status. Sandra then returned to Tapachula, in order to support her daughter and grandson during the prolonged process of applying for refugee status. Despite the intense re-traumatization and fear that she experienced by residing in the same city as her former aggressor, she constantly struggled to not cry or show vulnerability in front of her daughter: "I want my daughter to feel safe: 'I'm not alone, my mom is with me, my mom is strong…' so that

she feels that way" [*yo quiero que mi hija tenga seguridad: 'yo no estoy sola, mi mami está conmigo, mi mami es fuerte…' para que ella se sienta así*].

After everything that Sandra had been through, she felt like she was finally being rewarded – for her suffering, as well as for her own initiative to change her current situation. As she explained:

> When I received the positive resolution [for refugee status] I cried with joy because finally I'd achieved something, after all that had happened, after so much suffering and grief, I got what I wanted. Yes, this is a great achievement for me, something that *I* did *for myself*, through *my own* volition. It was difficult, I cried, I suffer, but now I have something of my own. I feel so fulfilled, liberated from all of the things I've carried with me over the years. Now I can live like everyone else, I can have a normal, stable life.

Here, we see a celebration of endurance, of the will to swim against the tide and to never tire. But it is an ambivalent position. On the one hand, it can be viewed as a strategic engagement with immobility; one temporarily relinquishes control in order to achieve a long-term goal (Brigden & Mainwaring 2016). It also raises important questions about how processes of asylum might articulate with broader feminist projects by fostering collective identity and feminist solidarity, such as through social programs that incorporate specific gender-based objectives. However, on the other hand, Sandra puts herself and potentially her children at risk by returning to Tapachula.

As I realized from Sandra's account and those of many other women, women may be better able than men to integrate subjective perceptions of waiting and stasis into positive understandings of self and one's life projects (Colon 2011), thereby resisting the existential dilemma and dehumanization generated through conditions of imposed immobility. Yet, while this perspective might enable positive coping for the individual and have the potential for positive social change, it may also serve to individualize and normalize a societal condition, and

thereby obscure structural and political inequalities that undergird institutional policies within asylum regimes. It also becomes a mechanism of boundary making and the reproduction of durable conditions of exclusion. Those who are unable to comply with institutional demands are seen as an aberration to the bureaucratic order, they become a potential threat, migrants "who are seen as simply seeking a better life, not necessarily protection" (Hyndman & Giles 2011), often resulting in the loss of institutional aid and resources.

Hage (2004, 2009) argues that agentive perceptions of waiting are inherently ambiguous, and that it is precisely because of this ambiguity that waiting is such an effective tool of state power. Even though the mundane emotional labor of waiting can become a source of meaning and agency, it is through compliance with the affective order of waiting that such processes of subordination are constructed and negotiated – creating subjects who "do not raise their voice" (Auyero 2011: 25). Women asylum-seekers draw on collectively generated, feminized notions of patience and sacrifice to make sense of their situations and find meaning in the hardships of weathering the crisis. Yet, through the integration of experiences of waiting into positive life narratives, they are more likely to comply with bureaucratic demands and to accept the terms of restricted mobility, foregoing more radical political positions and narrowing the possibilities for broader societal transformation. Women's affective interpretations of prolonged waiting could have substantial transformative potential if linked to broader feminist projects and political concerns. But without adequate state protection and a means towards long-term economic integration and social organizing, their agency will continue to be constrained by the emotional angst and embodied outcomes of forced immobility.

On a global scale, due to increased pressure from wealthier nation-states in the global north to curb inward migratory flows elsewhere, governments of what have been traditionally

considered countries of transit have assumed a greater role in the deterrence and management of prospective refugee populations. Shifting techniques of refugee management within transit countries often impose upon refugee-seekers prolonged periods of waiting defined by precarious conditions of spatial and temporal ambiguity. However, the specific mechanisms of power and exclusion that operate within this context, and the respective outcomes in migrants' lives, vary remarkable by geographic site, emphasizing the need for cross-cultural comparative analyses that bring to the fore what feminist scholars refer to as "a politics of location". As work by scholars such as Pratt and Hudson (1994), Kaplan (2005), and Mountz (2011) have shown, attentiveness to the specificities that differentiate distinct sites of refuge and social struggles among migrants is key to mapping "the intimacies and everyday dimensions of exclusion…where unbearable waits transpire" (Mountz 2011: 394). Central to this framework is a close examination of the linkages between particular locales and the interpersonal dynamics of refugee management, such as the gendered and affective dimensions of institutional encounters – a focus that resists universalizing theories of power for a more nuanced and humanistic approach. It is also crucial to understanding how social inequalities are reproduced and abusive treatment sustained in refugee contexts, despite seemingly neutral or compassionate forms of state and humanitarian intervention.

Women's affective experiences of waiting in Tapachula illuminate important insight into the role of emotional regulation in the geopolitics of migration control in the Southern Mexico borderlands. Careful attention to the psycho-sensorial dimensions of immobility exposes the crucial role of location in shaping specific, embodied subject positions during periods of waiting, particularly in relation to women's perceptions of dependency and personal insecurity. As women navigate the emotional geography of borderland life, uneven relations of power are

forged on an interpersonal level and within society, as well as between migrants and the state, reifying problematic distinctions between the "good" refugee and the menacing migrant. Furthermore, women, in turn, reproduce these ideological structures through religious-inflected discourse and practices that draw on feminized concepts of patience, sacrifice, and personal merit. Here, the "paradox of patience" (Appadurai 2004) is exposed: women's own efforts to cope and build resistance are the very means through which their oppression is reinforced.

The management of the refugee crisis in Mexico does very little to alter the unequal structures and practices through which the crisis was produced in the first place, which raises important questions about how refugee systems operate, and to what end, in contemporary global societies. In southern Mexico, refugee assistance primarily consists of short-term humanitarian aid with limited to no means for migrants to integrate into the local economy and to be truly protected from violence and bodily harm. But it is not only the absence of adequate intervention nor the circumstances of borderland life that expose migrants to increased vulnerability; it is often the very institutions that claim to be committed to refugee aid through which practices of exclusion and social differentiation are carved. Women migrants face particular challenges in navigating the complexities and contradictions of refugee management. Systematic institutional practices reinforce gender-normative concepts and hierarchies in ways that guide women to conform to and uphold the social order, often resulting in the production of the same cycles of violence and precarity from which women have been trying to escape. Until substantial shifts in the refugee regime are implemented, the refugee process will continue to engender durable social inequalities and, in many cases, will result in the re-victimization of the very people the nation-state has promised to protect.

Chapter Four

A MOVEMENT IN MOTION: COLLECTIVE MOBILITY AND EMBODIED PRACTICE IN THE CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRANT CARAVAN

It was the first Sunday of the Holy Week in 2017 when I joined a caravan of around fifty Central American migrants and a handful of supporters departed from a migrant shelter run by the Scalibrini Catholic order in Tapachula. At the front of the procession, a migrant caravan participant (henceforth referred to as *caravanero)* carried a large, wooden cross, carefully balanced against his chest, followed by two other *caravaneros* bearing a large white banner that stated "No more hate of the migrant" (*No más odio migrante*) in bold red and black letters (see Figure Three).

Nearly three weeks later, the caravan had grown to over 350 people. Despite weeks of physical hardship, hours upon hours of walking under the heat of the sun, on a trek that spanned approximately 2,175 miles (3,500 kilometers) through the Mexican states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Veracruz, the caravan reached Latin America's most revered Catholic shrine, the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Many of the *caravaneros* beelined to the basilica to attend the hourly mass, giving thanks for their safe arrival; others stretched out under the shade of the awning and cool, tiled floor at the church's entryway to rest aching feet and sore backs. Some played the part of the tourist and wandered around the premises, snapping selfies in front of the Basilica and other sites. It was a moment of celebration and respite before continuing what would still be a long journey north to Tijuana, where many of the *caravaneros* placed hope in the opportunity to request asylum at the United States (US) Port of Entry. Later that day, we retired to the nearby migrant shelter, the main hall now filled with hundreds of tarps and sleeping bags strewn out upon the floor. I sat with Lucy, a forty-five-year-old Honduran migrant, and her three adolescent children, chatting about the journey ahead. She confided that she had fears and many

uncertainties about what was to come, but she stated with calm resolution: "Yeah, it's difficult, but we are going to keep walking, that's what matters; God will give us the strength to know where to go and to keep walking this path."

Figure Three: Photograph of protest sign during the migrant caravan of 2017, Tapachula, Chiapas: *"No más odio migrante"* ["No more hate of the migrant"] (photograph by author)

The Migrant Caravan

The migrant caravan is a collective journey and social movement among predominantly Central American migrants and their supporters. The movement arose in the early 2000's in direct response to the transnational policies of migration control and refugee management in the US and Mexico. As I have discussed in previous chapters, such policies deliberately impede the efforts of migrants to reach their intended destinations through tactics of forced immobility, bureaucratic and legal regulations, militarization, and heightened exposure to risk. The elevated numbers of checkpoints in southern Mexico, for example, along with other Draconian security measures throughout the country, funnel migrants onto increasingly dangerous clandestine routes rife with risks of police abuse and detainment, gang violence, environmental hazards and

organized crime (e.g., kidnapping, extortion, and robbery). In response, the migrant caravan movement draws on strength in numbers, solidarity of transnational organizations, and the watchful eye of international press to mitigate the risks of covert mobility and improve access to basic human rights, such as the ability to apply for international asylum protection and to pursue dignified work in North American countries.

The caravan is comprised of Central American migrants who engage in a collective journey from the Mexico-Guatemala border, or from farther south, to a specific destination in Mexico. The caravan is initiated every spring during the Holy Week in commemoration of the Walk of Christ (*Viacrucis*) to raise attention to the displacement of migrants and the suffering that they endure in *el camino*. The first official caravan of this kind began in 2011. Over the next several years, the caravans were primarily organized by a network of Catholic migrant shelters and independent activists. The size of the group rarely surpassed more than 200-300 people and the trek typically ended in Mexico City. Although the early caravans hinted at the efficacy of collective travel as a mobile strategy to mitigate danger through the strength of numbers, they were just as much a symbolic action and protest as a logistical maneuver.

In 2017, the dynamics of the migrant caravan began to shift with the physical arrival of caravan to the San Yisidro Port of Entry along the US-Mexico border in Tijuana, Baja California, along with legal accompaniment provided by migrant rights activists to migrants seeking US asylum. By this point, secular human rights organizations, particularly the immigration rights group *Pueblo Sin Fronteras* (PSF) (People without Borders), had begun to take on a more central role in organizing the migrant caravans. Organizers' involvement entailed coordinating logistics (e.g., mapping out the route, soliciting local assistance with food distribution and resources); mediating communication between caravan participants and external

actors, such as government officials, migration agents, shelter workers, journalists, and local community residents; and disseminating information and education about the process of applying for US asylum. However, the nature and extent of the role of organizers has remained intentionally inchoate and fluid, an approach that is fundamental to their commitment to support the autonomy and self-organization of caravan participants. To this end, coordinators adamantly assert that rather than top-down leadership, their primary objective is to provide *accompaniment*, an approach that emerged from a long history of liberation psychology in Latin America (Friere 1970; Martin-Baro 1995) and continues to inform practices of refugee and migrant assistance in organizations across the world (Watkins 2015). Accompaniment is rooted in decolonized, culturally specific practices of solidarity and physical presence, which replaces armchair *expertise* with the practice of walking "in the company of others" (Fanon 2004), to "be present on a journey with a beginning and an end" (P. Farmer 2013). As demonstrated in the caravan, it is simultaneously a psychological, logistical, and embodied practice of support.

The 2017 caravan consisted of approximately 350 people, at its height. However, it was the first to reach the US-Mexico border in Tijuana with the explicit goal to facilitate access to US asylum procedures. By 2018, the caravan had grown to upwards of 1,500 people and became the first caravan to garner international media attention, particularly after US President Trump first tweeted about the impending "invasion" of a "mob" of Central Americans. Although President Trump used the caravan as an opportunity to advance xenophobic, nationalist rhetoric and policies, he inadvertently helped spark a growing movement. Indeed, beginning in 2018, a discernible shift was observed in the scale and political power of the migrant caravans, transforming from a relatively small-scale, symbolic event to what some contend has become a "burgeoning social movement…in resistance to a global order" (Thorton 2018). Since the 2018

caravan, migrant caravans have increased significantly in frequency and numbers, with organizing efforts initiating much farther south than previous years from within Central American countries.

The expanded coverage of the migrant caravan has raised considerable public awareness of the ongoing humanitarian crisis of violence and displacement occurring in Central America countries. The caravan is often framed within public discourse as a response to the extreme conditions of displacement that Central Americas endure: an exodus of refugees driven by the desperation of "hunger and death" (Gonzalez 2018). However, what is often obscured by the news hype surrounding the caravan movement is the long history of collective mobility from which the movement has arisen and taken shape, dating back much farther than the original *Viacrucis* caravan that began in 2011. Such oversight causes other frameworks to be overlooked, including those that might illuminate the spiritual, socio-cultural, and embodied aspects of collective mobility. A close examination of "on the ground" experiences within the specific historical and cultural context can provide a critical intervention for understanding the dynamics and long-term implications of migrant caravans, and how the collective journey itself and the associated deliberate act of movement, is constitutive of new forms of subjectivity and social transformation.

In this chapter, I draw on frameworks of liberation psychology (Hollander 1997; Martin-Baro 1995; Bulhan 1985) and the role of religion in political protest (Matovina 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo et al. 2004) to shed light on how group mobility can be a profound source of coping, liberation, agency, and resilience against long-term collective trauma. Scholars of Central American transit migration have discussed the transformative potential of the migrant journey (Brigden 2016; Ruiz Marrujo 2008), as well as the role of religion in how migrants cope

with hardships that arise in route (Straut Eppsteiner and Hagan 2016; Hagan 2008). However, these studies are generally limited to either individual-level subjective and inter-personal experiences of transit migration or the place of organized religion in providing spiritual and material support along migratory routes, with little attention to how processes of coping and resilience occur on the level of the collective. Furthermore, despite the centrality of bodily experience in studies on pilgrimage (Sennett 1994), rarely has the role of bodily practices and sensations, including those encompassed through the physical movement of the journey, been explored in the context of migrant mobility.

My analysis is informed by an "experience-near" ethnographic approach to the caravan movement. (In the subsequent section I will go into more detail about the specific caravans that I was involved in and what my participation entailed.) I pay particular attentiveness to the role of collective emotion and encounters with the material world in how new moral landscapes are shaped and become known. I recognize that rituals and teachings of organized religion, as well as political objectives, are important sources of support and motivation for *caravaneros* throughout the trek. However, I argue that it is through the corporeal encounters with a mobile community *in situ* that historical memory and the spiritual resonance of collective journeying is enlivened, giving *caravaneros* a sense of meaning of their forced displacement and the strength to cope with crisis.

To develop this insight, I draw on theories of liberation (Hollander 1997; Martin-Baro 1995; Bulhan 1985), which emphasize the collective nature of trauma and suffering. According to liberation frameworks, oppression is produced and maintained through the interplay of individual psychological patterns (e.g., internalized oppression) and meso- and macro-level structures and ideologies (e.g., racism, economic exploitation). Interventions, therefore, center on

two primary concerns: first, raising critical consciousness in individuals and their communities through modes such as education and discourse about the roots of social inequality; and, second, by transforming the social conditions and structures of oppression that exist within society. Given the diverse circumstances and cultural specificity through which oppression occurs, strategies for transformation vary widely based on the experiences and historical contexts of the communities involved. As discussed by the feminist psychologist Starhawk: "A psychology of liberation is one whose primary focus is the communities we come from and create. Our collective history is as important as our individual history . . . A liberation psychology is more concerned with ways of creating communal healing and collective change" (Starhawk 1987: 23). The collective nature of the migrant caravan, which fuses collective and religious practice with political protest, opens up the possibility for disrupting processes of isolation and invisibility that sustain the trauma produced by ongoing cycles of terror and violence present in migrants' everyday lives.

The Migrant Caravans of 2017 and 2018

Before I proceed to the analytical content of this chapter, it is important to provide a brief overview of the caravans in which I was involved, as well as insight into what my participation entailed. The caravans of 2017 and 2018 were comprised of Central American migrants primarily from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, who journeyed approximately 2,175 miles (3,500 kilometers) from the Mexico-Guatemala border in Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas, to the US-Mexico border in Tijuana, Baja California over a period of approximately 6–8 weeks. During this time, they engaged in a variety of modes of mobility, including travel by foot, bus, collective vans, and train.

During the course of the trajectory, the group participated in countless marches across migratory checkpoints and major cities throughout Mexico. At night, the *caravaneros* rested in migrant shelters located along the route or, more commonly, in outdoor public spaces, such as school courtyards, sports complexes, central plazas and city parks. The caravan occasionally settled for a few days at a time in villages to rest, care for blistered feet, and attend to other quotidian needs. Upon the final arrival in Tijuana, *caravaneros* resided in migrant shelters while attempting to apply for asylum in the United States[16]. They also attended meetings, legal workshops, and individual legal consultations about the asylum process carried out by PSF and affiliated organizations.

Figure Four: Map of migrant caravan trajectory, 2018

My findings draw on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 35 Central American *caravaneros* and 11 professional informants, primarily caravan coordinators and volunteers. As a human rights observer affiliated with Pueblos sin Fronteras in both caravans, I was able to use a variety of access points in addition to formal interviews, including informally speaking with

caravan participants and participant observation through deep ethnographic immersion, such as sleeping in parks, playing with children, cooking with and marching alongside caravan participants. In addition to participation in the caravan at the onset of the journey at the southern Mexico border and continuous trekking for more than a week at a time, I also accompanied *caravaneros* for nearly a month following their arrival in Tijuana in 2018. This included accompaniment during the weeklong sit-in protest at the San Yisidro Port of Entry after *caravaneros* were refused entry to request asylum; observation and assistance in organizational events and workshops; and extensive amounts of down time with *caravaneros* in informal settings (e.g., community centers, housing, restaurants, walking around the city, on the beach).

Spiritual and Psychological Dimensions of Collective Mobility

The nature of transit migration in Mexico has shifted dramatically alongside major regional changes in migration and refugee policy. A surge of humanitarian organizations has surfaced along dominant migrant routes to help migrants meet basic needs, such as food, shelter, and personal security. There has also been significant institutional development within both government and non-government arenas to manage the swell of Central American migrants seeking refugee status. However, as already described, ongoing efforts to retain refugees within Mexico's southern states has resulted in significant delays in settling refugee claims, which has generated increasing criticism and dialogue surrounding the conditions in which refugees are received by countries of asylum, as well as the broader political implications of the ongoing precarity and violence that refugees face while awaiting case resolution.

Alongside the dramatic changes that have occurred in transit-migration, scholars have begun to pay more attention to journeying itself. Although anthropologists have long examined the complex ways that migration drives social change, such as shifts in family composition,

reconfigured gender roles, and altered labor dynamics (Yeats 2009; Mahler and Pessar 2006), scholarship has tended to focus on social processes that occur within sending and receiving communities. Only recently have the "lived realities of transit" migration become regarded as a crucial site for novel theorizations about the transformative, productive, and contentious aspects of the migrant journey *en route* and what this insight reveals about broader claims over rights, citizenship, and sovereignty (Vogt 2018: 5; Balaguera 2018b; Andersson 2014).

The migrant journey is rarely a straight shot from point A to point B, but rather is punctuated by intermittent periods of immobility and movement that can span months, or even years (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016; Basok, Belanger, and Luz Rojas Wiesner 2015). Throughout the course of this trajectory, migrants encounter a range of diverse social actors and environments that may catalyze processes of transformation and adaptation, such as through the ephemeral communities and partnerships that form in migrant shelters along the route (Frank-Vitale 2011), or by performing specific nation, racial, or gender scripts in order to mitigate the risks of irregular mobility (Brigden 2018). Although these spaces and practices can be liberating, they nearly always unfold within a context of profound insecurity and violence, in which the potential for transformation is limited by the constraints and invisibility of "illegality". From such margins, opportunities to create networks of solidarity and to assert a collective voice are often outside one's reach.

Collective journeying provides a unique remedy to the isolation and vulnerability of clandestine, undocumented migration by creating a platform upon which diverse actors from a wide range of backgrounds can come together under a common cause. It is a particularly powerful form of mobilization for Latinx communities because of the long-standing historical legacy of pilgrimage and other ethno-religious ritual practice. In Latin America, pilgrimages to

sacred sites have occurred since pre-Columbian times and continue to be a common practice in the contemporary era, especially among Catholic and Christian denominations (Crumrine and Morinis 1991). It is customary for people to walk through the streets, from house to house or from town to town, to commemorate religious festivals and remembrances, such the walk of Christ along the Fourteen Stations of the Cross. Every year tens of thousands of people travel for days, even weeks, to visit revered shrines such as the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico or the Bom Jesus in Brazil.

Despite common assumptions that, historically, pilgrimage used to be a purely religious event aimed toward personal and spiritual transcendence, comparative case studies have revealed that even in pre-conquest times pilgrimage was leveraged for political purposes. For instance, pilgrimage can serve as a public stage upon which collective ideals are performed, communicated, and contested, often reflecting shifting dynamics and power struggles that occur within the broader social context (Crumrine and Morinis 1991). Studies by Kendall (1991) on pilgrimage in Guatemala, and Vreeland (1991) on the Motupe in Peru, both provide examples of how political groups promoted specific social systems and solidified their positions of power through their involvement and control of key aspects of pilgrimage rituals and shrines.

In contemporary society, social groups continue to draw upon the powerful cultural resonance and wide visibility of pilgrimage to challenge the current social order and assert political claims, particularly when other channels of political dispute have been restricted or denied, such as in cases of state oppression or transnational displacement. Numerous studies have explored ways in which collective journeying has been tied to contexts of forced displacement and the struggle for human rights, revealing the crucial role that religion has played in fueling popular mobilization (Matovina 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo et al. 2004; Rivera

Hernandez 2017). During the era of civil war and political persecution that ravaged much of Latin America throughout the 1980's and 1990's, collective action to oppose violence and displacement was informed and galvanized by the surge of liberation theories that surfaced within the particular historical moment (Lehmann 1992; Stephen 1997; Coutin 1998). Religious figures, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Archbishop Oscar Romero, and Ignacio Martin-Baro were at the forefront of promoting key tenets of liberation theology (e.g., social justice, critical consciousness) as a means to resist growing inequality and oppression of marginalized people. Concurrently, a group of psychoanalysts that had fled political persecution in the Southern Cone and were exiled to Mexico drew upon similar frameworks to advance new theories for the psychological treatment of trauma. These approaches that were adopted by and applied towards Central American populations and continue, today, to inform psycho-social interventions in social work, activism, human rights, and other arenas of humanitarian assistance (Hollander 1997).

Although liberation theories emerged from Latin America, they quickly gained popularity in movements across the US, particularly within the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980's (Coutin 1998; Garcia 2006). The Sanctuary Movement was a political and religious campaign in the Southwestern US to provide assistance and safe-haven to Central American refugees fleeing political turmoil. Protestant and Catholic churches organized caravans to transport Central American asylum seekers to other parts of the country to seek refuge. Sanctuary activists also provided accompaniment to displaced Central Americans during efforts to repatriate to their home communities following civil unrest. These organized groups of returning refugees and international inter-faith supporters used mass movement, organizational partnerships, and global

media attention to protect themselves against state resistance and ongoing warfare – similar tactics reflected in the contemporary caravan movement.

The legacy of liberation theology continues to resonate in contemporary social movements in Latin America and to inform the interpretative frameworks through which people make sense of social struggle and political resistance (Mackin 2015). Murals and photos of Oscar Romero can be found in social service organizations throughout Mexico and Central America, such as the La 72 migrant shelter in Tenosique, Tabasco, near the southern Mexico border. The work of Sanctuary Movement activists has been passed down to subsequent generations through contemporary US-based programs, such as the US-El Salvador Sister Cities committees network (https://www.elsalvadorsolidarity.org/), and is reflected in ongoing practices of accompaniment espoused in refugee assistance programs (Olayo-Méndez, Haymes, and Vidal de Haymes 2014) and transnational movements for migrant and refugee rights (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al. 2004).

Furthermore, several recent studies on migrant mobilization have traced the powerful role of religious practice in carrying out social justice work, both in collaboration with and separate from formal religious institutions, as has been noted in the Posada Sin Fronteras marches at the US-Mexico border (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al. 2004); the caravan of Central American mothers searching for disappeared loved ones (Rivera Hernandez 2017); and in the humanitarian work of local Mexican communities, such as the *Patronas* in Veracruz or the local church committees in Tenosique who assist migrants *en route* (Montes and Paris Pombo 2019; H. Wurtz and Wilkinson 2020). Although scholars have underscored the therapeutic effects of combining religious practices and political protest, such as through experiences of catharsis and shared suffering, the transgression of social roles, and increased community cohesion (Matovina 2003;

Hondagneu-Sotelo et al. 2004), there is limited understanding of how the corporeal experience of the collective journey itself becomes a source of coping and resilience.

In this chapter, I explore the migrant caravan as a site of both political and moral transformation that transpires over time through the embodied experiences and material practices of a mobile community *in situ*. In Turner's discussion of *communitas* (1969; Turner & Turner 1978), he has argued that the liminal (or "betwixt and between") social space created through pilgrimage cultivates a specific form of sociality and perceived unity ("fellow-feeling"), which allows participants to transcend the hierarchal social roles and social divisions of ordinary life. Building on this insight, I argue that through the collective traversal of space and shared practices, *caravaneros* encounter a form of ephemeral transcendence from the alienating bonds of generalized terror and violence that have plagued their recent lives. In this way, the meaning of their actions goes beyond political resistance or a means of survival to constitute a sacred space of collective and personal resilience. As the theologian Motavina has observed in his analysis of the spiritual meaning of protest: "These rituals are not only an experience of political protest, nor merely sources of cultural affirmation and retention, but practitioners' treasured means of encountering the sacred in their lives" (Matovina 2003:67).

In the context of the caravan, the sacred is not of extraordinary spiritual power or ethereal realms, but rather grounded firmly in what Hagan describes as "everyday religion" (2008): relations and practices of everyday life, those taken-for-granted threads of social fabric that often go unnoticed until they are taken away. This includes physical proximity to others, collaborative activities, mutual trust and dependency, and a shared sense of cultural identity and recognition. In this regard, the caravan is embodied resistance against the psychological and social ruptures of violence and displacement. It is an opportunity, albeit fleeting, to inhabit a different migrant

imaginary that transforms a narrative of covert action driven by personal motives to a collective struggle and exodus of a people in search of survival and the means to build a better life.

The Social Ruptures of Violence and Displacement

In order to fully grasp the healing potency of the migrant journey, one must first examine the roots and realities of collective trauma that have spurred the massive outmigration of Central Americans in the contemporary era. Regional literature on the cultural dynamics of violence illustrates that widespread, long-term exposure to a generalized state of terror creates significant ruptures in the daily rhythms and relations of everyday life, which profoundly affects how people think about and inhabit their surroundings (Matovian 2003; Ramirez 2003; Rivera Hernandez 2017). The social fabric of communities, founded on shared identity, collective engagement, and the capacity to aspire, is eviscerated by rival gangs and corrupt authorities through actions that range from control over land and local industry to torture and death, the ultimate expressions of social alienation. The process of displacement, therefore, begins long before one actually flees the country, with violent tactics of control and terror that estrange individuals from their communities, as well as from one's own sense of self.

Systematic, long-term violence, such as that found in the conditions of forced displacement, structures how and when people are able to move through social and economic spaces. As I have found in my research, for people who have lived in Central American countries, denied access to public places limits opportunities for both meaningful social interaction and dignified work. Those from "red zone" (high risk) communities experience a combination of physical violence, stigma, and structural constraints that limit their ability to find jobs, foster social relations, and secure reliable transportation. Youth migrants, for example, frequently discussed with me their inability to develop important social skills and future

aspirations due to the loss of social spaces of scholarship and diversion within their communities. In many communities, for example, people will not leave their houses after dark. One young woman in her early 20's from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, reported that even after "moving" to a "safer" neighborhood (her entire household was internally displaced by gang violence), she would still only leave the house between certain hours of the day and only to buy groceries or go to church.

People are constantly reminded of the impending threat of danger within their communities by the sound of gunshots, the scars that their neighbors bear, and the dead bodies that regularly appear in the streets near their homes, in their parks, and by their rivers. Many people are forced to drop out of school, and to abandon their jobs or their homes, as a result of extortion and threats of violence. Community members are often forced by gangs to act as spies and messengers, deteriorating neighborly trust and solidarity with suspicion and fear. As the Salvadoran woman described earlier, Felicia, shared about her social and psychological withdrawal after her son became the target of death threats and his teacher began to inquire about his continued absence in school:

> His teacher called me two times that night and with such insistence…and I don't know, maybe everything going on made me go crazy, but I couldn't trust anyone in the community…I couldn't sleep; I kept the door under a double lock and didn't draw the window shades. It was completely dark in the house, but I couldn't bring myself to sleep.

Others with whom I spoke experienced physical changes as a result of violence – traumatizing bodily experiences that threaten a sense of personhood and identity. One fifteen-year-old young man from El Salvador, for instance, whom I met in a migrant shelter in Tapachula, had developed a nervous tick in his left eye after he had witnessed the murder of a former classmate; and a thirteen-year-old young woman from Honduras residing at the same

shelter was confined to a wheelchair after being shot in the spine by the father of her jealous ex-boyfriend. In such cases, events of violence often lead to months of hiding and displacement involving long periods of reclusion within "safe houses" of friends or family, punctuated by chaotic moments of flight without warning. Families are torn apart in the process: young adults leave behind their ailing parents who cannot weather the journey; a mother must choose which and how many of her children she can afford to take with her; and for them and many others, any semblance of "normalcy" and routine is lost to the exigencies of survival.

The cumulative effect of the ongoing, quotidian, and overlapping forms of violence found in these communities is what Martin-Baro (1991) interprets as a type of chronic psychological warfare and social control that is experienced *en carne propia* (in one's own flesh), in which the "lived body is shot through with anxiety, terror, and despair" (Jenkins 1991). In such conditions, violence interrupts the continuity of life course events and important processes of growth and development, and this has a profound effect on how one sees him- or herself within the daily routines and imagined futures of their surrounding life-worlds. Interviewees regularly recounted how on their return to Honduras or El Salvador, after a failed attempt at migration, they experienced feelings of depression and hopelessness because they were unable to envision a future for themselves in the current social conditions of their communities. People's relationships with the past and future are displaced by a "perpetual present" consumed by the emotional and material demands of managing daily hardship and struggle (Sanchez 2003).

As a result of ongoing pervasive violence, people are estranged from the everyday: the safe haven of "home" can no longer be assumed, nor the autonomy over how one moves through time and space within quotidian practices. Existential longings to aspire, to grow as an individual and deepen family or community roots, lose foundation when even the most mundane tasks

become difficult to achieve. Consequently, people become psychologically trapped in a constant state of alert and loss of autonomy that erodes a sense of identity and recognition. As Hollander (Hollander 1997) found in her work on the "dirty wars" in South America: "This personal vigilance led to the conscious creation of a false self, a partial and unrepresentative public portrayal of one's personality that was manufactured in order to survive the impingements of an environment that demanded extreme measures of adaptation" (1997: 111).

Even when Central Americans manage to flee their countries of origin and cross into Mexico, they continue to experience ongoing forms of violence that results in similar processes of restricted movement, hyper-vigilance, fear, and invisibility. As described earlier, many undergo weeks of imposed immobility and self-isolation along the Southern Mexico border, where they are forced to reside throughout the duration of their application for refugee status – an experience commonly delineated by fear, boredom, and existential angst caused by the precarious and dangerous conditions of the borderlands (H. Wurtz 2018). One Guatemalan *caravanero,* who joined the caravan after being denied refugee status in Mexico, described the time he spent waiting for case resolution as a form of institutional violence, an imposed period of "wasted" time and social paralysis defined by rampant discrimination, unemployment, and immobility: "One comes from his country, fleeing, to be locked up by another" (*viene uno de su país, huyendo…a que lo encierren a otro*).

As described in the introduction, migrant shelters are also highly restrictive. In many cases, migrants are required to leave the shelter during daytime hours; they then have to return at a designated hour in the late afternoon in order to receive food and shelter for the night. After that hour, shelter doors are locked and entry denied. Furthermore, migrants are often restricted to certain spaces within shelter walls, generally based on gender and/or family composition, and

they must adhere to certain rules regarding behavior, mealtime procedures, and even, in some cases, physical appearance. Migrant shelters and aid organizations throughout Mexico have been criticized for paternalistic and exclusionary practices (e.g., refusing shelter to transgender migrants) and a denial of migrant agency and autonomy, their practices even being compared to *carceral* or panoptic conditions (Balaguera 2018b). Those who secure independent housing through humanitarian assistance find it difficult to exercise spatial independence as they struggle with a lack of resources and transportation, in addition to well-justified fear of moving through public space.

Those who opt to continue North through their own means often endeavor to conceal their Central American identity and maintain anonymity in order to mitigate vulnerabilities to violence and crime (Brigden 2016). Furthermore, through a discourse of "illegality" and criminalization, the realities and roots of migrant suffering (and their struggles to overcome them) are completely disavowed. In these circumstances, the conditions of collective trauma are prolonged and reproduced by the very agencies to which migrants turn to for protection (Chapter 2). Amid this, the transformative power of the caravan lies in its capacity to disrupt patterns of collective trauma by bearing witness to the atrocities migrants have suffered and giving meaning to their collective struggle. This is achieved through an assemblage of discourse, symbols, bodily practices, and engagement with the material world that is specifically shaped by the unique context of collective travel, and which occurs in the open daylight and in plain sight.

Sacred Encounters in Collective Mobility: Sites, practices, and materiality of resilience

Previous studies on Mexican and Central American migration have examined the integral role of religion and spirituality in the migrant undertaking. For instance, Hagan (2008) found that prior to their departures, many migrants and their families underwent pilgrimages or visits to

sacred sites to seek God's blessing for a safe and fortuitous journey. During the trajectory, they also engaged a number of religious practices to cope with anticipated hardship and uncertainty, such as erecting popular shrines for their communities; praying with spiritual companions; and through the use of material objects, such as medallions or prayer cards. Hagan describes that such practices and frameworks, while influenced by institutional contexts, often took form through "folk, popular, and domestic activities" closely tied to concepts of home and belonging, which were continuously modified and remade through the journey itself. She asserts:

> These everyday coping activities reflect cultural practices and familiar memories unique to their home communities, memories and practices that are often appropriated in times of need and transformed and shaped by the social context of the journey. In this sense, religion is a dynamic process that cannot be separated from the journey or the actions of the traveling migrants (2008: 115).

In addition, ritual symbols and practices of pilgrimage are commonly deployed in movements to raise awareness of the plight of migrants and calls for social justice, such as the 2019 *Jornada por la Justicia* at the El Paso-Ciudad Juarez border. During this event, hundreds of Catholics participated in a walk through El Paso and across the border in response to the inhumane treatment of migrants and the recent massacre of 22 Latinx individuals by an American domestic terrorist in El Paso. Bearing a banner of Guadalupe, the group stopped at several sites of "hope and transformation," where they engaged in group prayer and religious blessings, followed by the physical accompaniment of 15 Central American asylum-seekers to the US Port of Entry (ISN 2019). Hondagneu-Sotelo and colleagues refer to this as "politicized spirituality" – a collective endeavor that occurs within a public venue and is "directed at a social and political issue, but yet resonates with religious beliefs" (2004: 154).

Similarly, the migrant caravan – often referred to as *"Viacrucis"* (the Stations of the Cross) – draws upon the walk of Christ to symbolize the sacrifice of migrants and the suffering

that they endure "*en el camino,*" or while "on the road," in their endeavors to seek a better life. Caravan trajectories are mapped upon the "sacred geography" (Hagan 2008) of migrant shelters that have surfaced along popular migrant routes. Like the religious ritual of the Stations of the Cross, in which practitioners stop at each station to pray and reflect, *caravanero*s stop at the shelters along the way to rest and rejuvenate. Throughout the long northbound journey, caravan participants encounter religious shrines and murals, engage in prayer, and receive blessings by local priests at the various migrant shelters, churches, and local communities that are willing to provide aid. Although religious practice varies widely across the caravan population, Christian beliefs are a common source of strength and perseverance, many attributing God for their ability to withstand hardship and to have the psychological will to press on, both physically and emotionally. In the words of a *caravanera* named Maya from El Salvador: "God loves me and I know that I need him at my side, because he gives me strength to go on, and because life goes on and there is no sense in turning back to the past."

Constructing New Migrant Narratives through Visibility and Representation

The fact that the caravan travels along dominant migratory routes and engages in similar modes of mobility as migrants traveling through irregular means is important both for political expression and personal coping. Along the journey, the caravan engages in the continuous occupation of public spaces: they walk for hours in daylight down highways, often resting beneath the shade of major bridges before proceeding through migratory check points; they set up camp in schools, central plazas, and sport complexes of local villages; they negotiate rides with local buses and vans, and travel together atop the northbound freight train. However, in stark contrast to the effects of state and humanitarian practices that push them into the shadows or hide them away behind shelter walls, caravan participants demand recognition by taking back

public space; they inhabit spaces from which they had been previously denied and in ways they had never had the freedom to explore. Through such acts, they evoke what Bourdieu calls symbolic power, or what he describes as:

> the power to constitute the given by stating it, to act upon the world by acting upon the representation of the world . . . defined in and by a definite relation that creates belief in the legitimacy of the words and of the person who utters them . . . [a kind of] magic . . . (1992: 148).

Studies on clandestine transnational migration have described the efforts of migrants to "pass" as Mexican citizens in order to avoid detection (Brigden 2016; C. Menjivar 2000), for example, by altering the way one dresses or speaks. In contrast, the caravan presents a rare opportunity for participants to publicly exercise self-representation and to embrace national affiliations and other social scripts in ways that resist the repressive forces of containment and invisibility. This is enacted through a range of embodied and material practices involving modes of self-expression (e.g., dress, speech), affirmation of ethnic identity through positive public discourse and recognition, and by inhabiting otherwise "forbidden" spaces (e.g., migrant check points), replacing fear and humiliation with the "pride in belonging to a people" (Martin-Baro 1995).

Images of the caravan, for instance, reveal a material and stylistic diversity that departs drastically from those commonly portrayed by the media and popular culture of migrants in discrete, humble attire, faces hidden beneath a baseball cap or by the shadow of night. Rather, images from the caravan depict an assortment of materialistic styles: *caravaneros* donning hip-hop styles and country-specific garb; the group of transgender women dressed to the nines, after swapping wigs and makeup tips; and several Central American flags circulating in the crowd. Instead of dodging immigration enforcement agents (*la migra*) or hiding in the back of a truck, they pass through checkpoints with banners high: chanting and zooming by on skateboards with

arms raised in victory; and some even snap photos of migration agents and police officers who watch the caravan go by from afar. Here, we see a direct and visible shift in power dynamics: it is now the migration agent who is depersonalized and objectified by the migrant gaze; it is the migration agent whose body is suspended by inaction and whose mobile (and political) potency is denied.

Figure Five: Photographs from the migrant caravans of 2017 and 2018 (photographs taken by author)

Pilgrimage scholars have discussed the symbolic power of place and ritual practice in processes of healing and spiritual growth (Crumrine and Morinis 1991). Pilgrimages that center on commemorating and healing from trauma often traverse sites "desecrated by sin" (Pontifical Council 1998), such as mass graves, sites where violence or homicide has occurred, or locations of state oppression (e.g., national borders). Through the traversal of dominant and heavily symbolic sites along migratory routes that are commonly riddled with danger, violence, and shame (esp., trains, highways, checkpoints), the collective trauma of the migrant condition is imbued with political meaning.

Wood (Wood 1990) has described such actions as a "vector of memory," or a type of ritual performance that promotes a collective view of the world and helps construct a common identity. In the migrant caravan, participants not only draw attention to historical context; they

also rewrite the present by constructing a new narrative – a narrative in which they are not "bad hombres," irresponsible parents, or helpless victims, but a people united by shared experiences and common goals, demanding accountability and recognition. This is often reinforced by the words and conviction of movement leaders who galvanize collective emotion and solidarity through recognition of a shared struggle.

For example, in 2018, over 1,000 *caravaneros* congregated in an empty stadium in a small town in central Oaxaca for a public forum to discuss the caravan's next steps. Manuel, one of the movement's most active and experienced coordinators, hollered out to the crowd: "Trump thinks we're all going to invade the country to take advantage of DACA…how many of you know what DACA is? [*silence*] Okay, *three* people; but there [in the US] it's all about DACA, DACA, Da…*cabrón* [bastard]!" The stadium resounded with laughter. "Now, how many of you are familiar with the violence that has plagued your countries?" [*an uproar of consensus*] "So what do we want? We want to live without fear; we want our children to be able to go to school without worrying that they might be killed…we have rights to the land; we have rights to our families; and we are going to look for a way to live in peace, respecting the law…if they give us the opportunity!"

Liberation psychologists assert that the disavowal of the roots and realities of trauma is key to sustaining terror and victimization. Therefore, public recognition and visibility of what victims of social trauma have suffered is an important step towards collective healing. Through a mix of humor and a discourse of rights, Manuel and other caravan leaders give voice to power and initiate processes of raising critical consciousness about the roots of inequality and oppression.

Creating Solidarity through Collective Practices of Movement and the Body

Critical discourse and actions that render visible the struggles that migrants face throughout the course of the journey are central to the caravan's transformative potential. However, as pilgrimage scholars have discussed, it is the collective and ritualistic practices that participants undergo that set the journey apart from other forms of mobilization, often through the way that practices incite new, intense bodily and sensorial experiences (Sennett 1994). This includes physical pain and expressions of sorrow (e.g., mounting stone stairways on bare knees), as well as shared conviviality and celebration (e.g., feasts, dances, intoxication). Such practices impart a sense of the extraordinary, of "otherworldliness" (ibid), something that lies outside of the ordinary spatiotemporal order, but which is socialized and made manageable through communal practice. New modes of being, such as communal living, new food or dress codes, unique relationships or roles that are formed, all serve to induce an altered state of consciousness that allows the individual to access their inner power, resulting in increased resilience and other positive psychological and somatic effects.

New sensorial experiences, including an altered sense of time and space, also have the potential to cultivate a newfound sense of commonality among people of diverse social identities (e.g., class, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation) who normally would not interact with one another. Like Turner's (1969) notion of *communitas*, social differences are suspended temporarily as participants navigate together the exigencies of a physically and emotionally taxing experience to reach common goals (in this case, safe arrival at the US-Mexico border). Even though this sense of social equality is fleeting, participants undergo a lasting transformation.

In the caravan, we see the formation of an alternative, aspirational, and fleeting version of *communitas,* an embodied solidarity constituted through a shared sense of danger and mutual need. The power of the caravan lies in its strength in numbers, which warrants cooperative

practice and mutual dependence. *Caravaneros* share the burden of hardship -- sleeping night after night on concrete floors; grueling long walks under the hot sun; the emotional distress of an unpredictable trajectory and not knowing where your next meal will come from. Yet by confronting this hardship as a group within a distinct timescape set by the event itself (rather than according to timelines shaped by migration control policies), individual suffering is transformed into meaningful shared experience based on a common sense of humanity (or what some participants conceptualized as human rights).

Attentiveness to the specific modes of motion in which travelers engage is particularly illuminating of how these distinct dynamics are constituted and made meaningful. For example, long walks in precarious circumstances typify the experience of transit migration through Mexico. Generally, this is one of the most dangerous aspects of the migrant journey as migrants are increasingly forced to walk along routes riddled by gang violence, police abuse, and environmental hazards (e.g., heat exhaustion, falls, snake bites, speeding traffic). For caravan participants, walking was a process of both enriching socialization and suffering. At times, it created opportunities for uncommonly genuine interaction among people from diverse backgrounds who might not otherwise interact and often stimulating critical and reflective dialogue across social divisions (Turner and Turner 1987). Topics that might not be broached in an everyday setting seemed to arise frequently, as with the long conversation I engaged in with a handful of cis-women and trans-women from El Salvador and Honduras about gender- and sexuality-based violence, while we rested beneath the shade of a mango tree and indulged on fallen fruit. However, walking was also a source of endangerment and pain. Even though the group frequently departed in the early dawn to beat the insatiable heat of southern Mexico, the combination of physical exertion, dehydration, and lack of appropriate materials, sometimes

resulted in people fainting, incurring painful blisters and bleeding of the feet, and even experiencing robbery and assault when they fell far behind the group.

For logistical and symbolic motives, the caravan tends to begin with long stretches of walking down highways and through the villages and cities that mark the route. At the head of the march, a man bears a wooden cross, a symbol of Jesus's suffering as recounted in the holy ritual of the Stations of the Cross. Suffering and hardship are key features of traditional pilgrimages; the struggles one endures along the way are often justified and given meaning through religious beliefs and practice. In the case of the caravan, the combination of religious representations with symbolically imbued modalities of movement probe society's moral conscious, challenging dominant narratives of the migrant condition, while reinforcing a sense of collective identity. Furthermore, it is simultaneously an individual and social experience, generating both a sense of independence, as well as collective agency. The following quote by a caravan organizer reveals some of these themes in which the physical body and the metaphorical body e/merge through motion.

> …Walking is important because of the occupation of physical space, and because of the physical manifestation of walking, and the experience of walking…the difficulty of…like every single person…every single human being walking is putting in their own effort in order to advance. Nobody can walk for you. Somebody can drive a car for you, but nobody can walk for you. And everybody walking together is everybody putting in their bit of effort to move forward as a group (male, US).

Train travel was also central to participants' accounts of the caravan and is perhaps the mode of mobility most emblematic of the role of psychosomatic experience in catalyzing social transformation. One of the primary modes of transportation for irregular migrants in transit is atop a network of northbound freight trains, infamously known as *La Bestia* (The Beast). Like the covert migratory walking trails riddled with violence and crime, *La Bestia* looms large in the

public imaginary, generally associated with violence, dismemberment, and death. It is common to see images circulated through the media of mutilated bodies, crying children, and precarious circumstances (photo). *La Bestia* also features prominently in discourse about the increased militarization of migration control. It has become a primary target of repressive measures instigated by the Mexican government in order to stem northbound migration, including the construction of large rock pillars set along both sides of the tracks and low hanging structures that the trains must pass through in efforts to deter migrant mobility. There have been increased government raids on these freight trains, as well as accounts of immigration agents using TASERS to remove people from the moving vehicle (Nazario 2015).

Despite the risks, train travel was considered essential to the caravan's success, not only because of sheer logistical concerns with how to move hundreds of people across a massive country within a matter of weeks and with limited support for transportation, but also as a result of its symbolic power in constructing new narratives through the visualization of migrant mobility and collective action. Brigden provides similar insight in her discussion of *La Bestia* as both a logistical site of information and networking among traveling migrants, as well as a political tool of activism and resistance. She states: "The tactical and political worlds become one social reality along the route" (2018: 84), as migrants pursue train travel as a resource for survival, while activists, reporters, and researchers engage its folkloric and symbolic power to decry human rights abuses and make "invisible victims visible" (ibid).

My analysis of the caravan departs from Brigden's observations in two critical ways. First, in the caravan, the political potency of the train was not made through photos and reports to appeal to public spectators; the political was enacted *in situ* through direct action and collaboration with the *caravaneros.* These actions are not only enhanced by the visibility of the

media, but are grounded, too, in the legal demand for and exercise of refugee rights. As one male coordinator relayed:

> For me, direct action on the train…is at the heart of the battle…We have to organize where the people are at, which is the train, the vertebral column of the migrant journey…you have to organize *en el camino*…where the people are at, where the danger is at. If you are able to do that, you have the power.

Here, a much different narrative emerges; through collective mobility, *La Bestia* is transformed from a space of death to a critical site of social and political engagement. Coordinators conducted interviews and provided asylum training while riding atop the train. They disseminated information about the asylum process and how to prepare for the dreaded "credible fear" interview. Far from what would be considered ideal by most for such type of work, as the coordinator suggested in the above testimony, the train is *where the people are at* – literally, yes, but also in terms of a deep sense of presence, intensified by heightened sensorial experience.

This leads to my second point not captured in other accounts: through collective travel, the train, like the caravan, also became a conduit of social and personal transformation. Something that almost ubiquitously emerged in discussions with informants about train travel was the intense visceral quality of the experience – the heat of the metal, the bone-chilling rainy nights, the discomfort of congested bodies, the gut-wrenching fear of unsteady steps or shady looking men with long sideways glances. However, despite these extremes (and perhaps because of them) many caravan participants described the experience as unforgettable and the pinnacle of solidarity and unification throughout the course of the journey. As Julia, a thirty-four-year-old Honduran woman who participated in the 2018 caravan explained:

> …In our country they say that *La Bestia* is dangerous, that many people have died. But, honestly, it was a great experience, an experience in which you learn to share with others. It taught us how to be more humane; to be able to feel what

> others feel; to be able to understand each other and to support each another in difficult moments; to encourage each other to stay positive…these are moments that we'll never forget, that will always be with us.

Danger and hardship are particularly pronounced on the train, setting into stark contrast the power of mutual aid and shared struggle, while increasing receptivity to the messages conveyed. In pilgrimage studies, this is often described as the power of the pilgrimage to mediate poles of the sacred and the profane; as a privileged site where an otherworldly quality or grace is made accessible amidst the "entanglements, confusions, and sorrows" of the profane sphere (Crumrine and Morinis 1991: 10). By giving meaning to experiences of suffering and the power of solidarity, migrants and activists tap into the sacred as a unifying and collective force. Even despite its ephemerality, this provides an alternative framework for how migrants think about and engage mobility, which has important implications for how they remember the journey and the broader public narratives that emerge from their recounting these events to others.

Caravaneros' embodied experiences and encounters with the material world play a critical role in the social and political transformative potential of collective mobility. By drawing on cultural and historical frameworks that resonate with the collective memory of Central American struggle and solidarity, the caravan movement provides a profound source of coping with the hardships of forced displacement and a potential conduit for overcoming the sequelae of shared trauma. This is accomplished primarily through the movements' efforts to expose the roots of violence and precarity that have driven migrants from their homes and to bear witness to their suffering, as well as through the psycho-sensorial experiences *en route* that create a sense of unity and collective struggle. As Hollander reminds us, "Trauma is by its very nature something that resignifies one's life, not in the symptoms or the sequelae of the injury, but by the meaning one attributes to it through the psychic elaboration of the experience" (1997: 143).

Many *caravaneros* continue to engage in acts of collective struggle while awaiting asylum cases in the US, such as the Adelanto Hunger Strike of 2017, a protest organized by former *caravaneros* to denounce the egregious conditions of US immigration detention facilities (Balaguera 2018a). On other fronts, several former *caravaneros* have joined the ranks of migrant rights advocacy organizations, which spearhead letter writing campaigns and fundraisers for refugees in detention. Others continue the struggle and the process of healing through other means, such as the case of Manuel, who is pursuing studies to be a human rights lawyer in Canada, or Vanessa, who has participated in various advocacy campaigns in the US to educate the public about the realities of transgender asylum seekers. A crucial step to overcoming collective trauma lies in the ability to regain a sense of control over one's ability to change the current circumstances and help construct a better future for oneself and for others (Hollander 1997).

Unfortunately, for many, the possibilities and hopes that the caravan movement represented have only recently been diminished, if not completely destroyed, by increasingly restrictive US instigated transnational migration policies under the Trump administration. Arrival at the pilgrimage's "sacred center," which for so many on the caravan was defined by the US-Mexico border, increasingly leads to significant re-traumatization through practices of denied entry, forced immobility, family separation, and ongoing acts of violence and discrimination. More recently, even the possibility of arriving at the border through collective travel has become a pipedream. One of the most recent migrant caravans in January 2020, consisting of 4,000 Central American migrants, was met by the Mexico state with an "iron-fisted" response of pepper spray and physical force (Semple and McDonald 2020). As a result, the caravan was effectively dismantled at the southern Mexico border, with hundreds of migrants being deported

or detained. As this analysis has shown, collective practice and solidarity provide powerful tools for coping with the collective trauma of generalized terror and violence. However, as long as state governments attempt to oppress caravans with Draconian anti-immigrant measures, migrant communities must continue to endeavor to find new ways to leverage the emancipatory potential of their collective struggles.

Chapter Five

REWRITING MOBILITY IMAGINARIES: LGBTQ+ YOUTH MIGRANTS, ACTIVISM, AND BELONGING

In late May of 2018, Roxana Hernandez, a 33-year-old transgender woman from Honduras, died while in custody of the US Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) agency. Just a few weeks prior, Roxana had arrived at the US-Mexico border as part of the 2018 migrant caravan. Shortly thereafter, along with several of her fellow LGBTQ *caravaneros,* she applied for US asylum at the San Ysidro Port of Entry in California and was taken into ICE custody. While detained, Roxana was exposed to conditions that have been described by her companions and migrant rights activists as "torture," including being detained for hours in a highly air-conditioned holding cell (which migrants commonly refer to as the icebox, or "*hielera,*" because of the frigid temperatures that are intentionally maintained by staff), as well as repeated refusals by ICE agents to requests for medical assistance made by Roxana and her companions. Over a week later, Roxana was finally transferred from ICE facilities to a hospital in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for HIV-related complications, including pneumonia and severe dehydration. But it was too late: on May 30th Roxana was declared dead from cardiac arrest.

Roxana has since become a dominant symbol of LGBTQ+ migrant rights and a rallying cry for activism against the brutality of ICE agents. Her story is often drawn upon by activists to raise attention to the widespread impunity of the US government for repeated instances of violence and negligence committed within ICE facilities. Shortly after Roxana's death, the US-based organization *Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement (TQLM)* spearheaded a National Action campaign, #Justice for Roxana, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to raise awareness about human rights abuses occurring against detained migrants and to demand the abolition of ICE.

Demonstrators carried photos of Roxana and constructed candlelit vigils in her honor, quickly drawing the attention of mainstream media and other advocacy organizations. Furthermore, with growing discussion and activities surrounding the upcoming Pride month, her story served as a powerful reminder of how far the US LGBTQ+ rights movement still had to go to achieve meaningful, inclusive equality throughout society. Roxana was drawn into important public discourse about the limitations of progressive movements that fail to challenge underlying structures of oppression. As the leftist lesbian journalist Tatiana Cozzarelli wrote during the first weeks of Pride month, just weeks after Roxana's death:

> This Pride, I look around and mostly, I feel rage. Children are being separated from their parents at the border and the capitalists are making rainbow products in sweatshops. So, instead of wrapping myself in corporate-sponsored rainbows and happily celebrating with a corporate-sponsored rainbow beer in my hand, this Pride, I fight for a trans undocumented immigrant who died in ICE custody, Roxana Hernandez (Cozzarelli 2018).

By 2019, and on the anniversary of her death, the #Justice for Roxana campaign had expanded to include participants based in 21 US cities. This was largely a result of grassroots organizing efforts of Roxana's former caravan companions, many who had since been released from ICE custody and were awaiting hearings for asylum. By 2020, campaign efforts had gone international, including collaborative action and organizing between TQLM and a trans youth organization in Mexico City, along with the ongoing and intensified involvement of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers within the United States.

The struggle of Roxana and her companions has become part of a growing transnational movement that shares critical intersections with collective action against racism, police violence, and gender- and sexuality-based inequalities. It is important to recognize, however, that the struggles of these youth did not begin on the political platforms of US-based social movement organizations after their arrival at the US-Mexico border. Nor were they founded primarily on

ideological grounds. Their involvement in political activism has a much longer history that took shape during their mobile trajectories in Mexico. Although collective organizing and advocacy is are important parts of this story, it is also the small, close encounters of intimate, embodied experience among youth and their travel companions that has fueled the power of their testimonies and actions. Relevant moments include swapping wigs for a photo shoot to raise funds in a public awareness campaign; huddling together atop *La Bestia* to fight the cold night air while travelling in the caravan; dancing on the beach of Friendship Park after their arrival in Tijuana before they crossed the border to seek US asylum; and fighting hunger pangs while huddled together on the cold tile floor of the ICE detention center when they went on a hunger strike to protest the denial of medical services. Attention to how LGBTQ+ youth frame these defining moments is crucial to understanding the motives and mechanisms of their political mobilization, as well as the political potency of their narratives in ongoing movements for liberation and equality.

This chapter draws on the accounts of LGBTQ+ youth migrants from Central America to explore experiences of personal and collective transformation that occur on their journeys between and beyond Mexico's borders. Central to my argument is that the growing involvement of LGBTQ+ Central American migrant youth in social justice action and discourse has been fundamental to advancing a new, more inclusive movement within LGBTQ+ rights activism in the United States and beyond – something that I will circle back to at the end of the chapter. However, my primary concern throughout the chapter is *what came before* in the lives and mobile trajectories of these youth that shaped their distinct possibilities for engagement in collective mobilization. Although an emergent and growing literature has begun to explore migrant youth's organizing and advocacy efforts following their arrival to the United States,

particularly within the DREAMERS movement and related *Undocuqueer* activism (Chavez 2013; Unzueta Carrasco and Seif 2014; de la Torre and Germano 2014), this has been scarcely explored in relation to youth's migrant trajectories *en route*. However, as my findings reveal, failure to account for youth's experiences in transit (beyond conventional frameworks of trauma and violence) overlooks a period of transformative potential in youth's migratory and life projects, as well as important potential opportunities for engagement and support of vulnerable youth populations on the move.

In response, this chapter traces Central American LGBTQ+ youth's involvement in grassroots organizing efforts during the course of their journeys through Mexico, with particular attention to their participation in the 2017 and 2018 *Diversidad Sin Fronteras (DSF)* [Diversity without Borders] LGBTQ+ migrant caravan movement. These individuals migrate at a particularly formative time in their life course development when they are negotiating their own sense of identity and personal life motives across a rapidly shifting social and political terrain. I argue that through their pursuit for both social belonging and survival along *el camino*, they forge new pathways of understanding and engaging shifting notions of self, kinship, intimacy and care, and, in turn, their own capacity for political struggle.

At the heart of these processes lie the endeavors of youth to push back against the constraints of institutional- and state-driven logics of youth migration control, including myriad forms of ageist and homophobic inequality that undergird institutional policies and praxis within the transnational (US-Mexico-Central America) migration control regime. One of the primary means through which youth attempt to resist and reconfigure the terms of their migration is through building presence and recognition in virtual and visual landscapes, such as through the use of digital media and technology (e.g., Internet social media, photography, video). Through

critical attention to how youth discuss and harness cultural practices of digital media, I show that youth not only engage in sophisticated rights-based discourse, but also actively construct imaginaries of an alternative future, revealing the potency of hope as a political practice.

In order to lay out my argument, I will first provide an overview of the relevant literature. I will then discuss the various institutional processes and sites through which dominant representations of Central American LGBTQ+ youth migrants have been construed and promulgated. I next demonstrate how youth's resistance to such (mis)representations and other forms of denied agency became an entry point into critical discourse about social justice and equality and a spring board for their political engagement. I conclude with a brief discussion about the important role that LGBTQ+ youth migrants from Central America have played in helping to advance LGBTQ+ rights activism in the United States, particularly since their spotlight in global media in the 2017 and 2018 migrant caravans.

Digital Media, Youth Agency, and Activism

It is widely acknowledged within contemporary social science literature that children and youth are transformative social agents with cultural practices and perspectives distinct from their adult counterparts (Amit and Wulff 1995; Bucholtz 2002; Cole and Durham 2007; Coe 2010; Sharp 2002). However, migration scholarship has been slower to get on board. Despite sea changes in the 1970's that brought gender to the center of analysis in studies on migration, only recently has youth become fully visible as a dominant social category and structuring dimension of migrant experience (Bohne and Hunner-Kreisel 2016). Furthermore, despite a surge in intersectional scholarship and theory within migration studies, there continues to be a dearth of literature that explicitly engages the intersection of youth status with other axes of social diversity. LGBTQ+ youth, for example, have been largely absent from academic scholarship on

migrants and refugees. Those accounts that do exist tend to focus on processes of reception and assimilation within destination countries, in which the experiences of youth prior to arrival are discussed almost exclusively through frameworks of violence and victimization, if at all (UNICEF 2017; Pruitt, Berents, and Munro 2018).

An explicit focus on LGBTQ+ migrant youth has also been glaringly absent from mainstream media and popular discourse, mounting to what Pullen describes as a "seemingly ghostlike" presence bound to narratives of vulnerability and unrealized (or completely unrealistic) aspirations for authentic social belonging (Pullen 2018). Although, to my knowledge, no existing studies have examined the perspectives of LGBTQ+ migrant youth about media representations of LGBTQ+ migrants and refugees, research on media depictions of their counterparts in the United States has found that they continue to be characterized by stereotypical representations that emphasize vulnerability and victimhood (Evans 2006; Marshall 2010), dependence on adult protection (Macintosh and Bryson 2008), as well as a lack visibility of sub-groups and communities (e.g., LGBTQ+ youth of color). Such dominant media representations sharply contrast with experiences of youth's actual lives and aspirations, limiting LGBTQ+ young people's perceptions of their own future trajectories and opportunities for social inclusion (McInroy and Craig 2017). Those journalistic and other media accounts in which migrant and LGBTQ+ status are mutually acknowledged are often overly simplified for public appeal – "powered by the search for winning stories" (Miller 2005: 165) – or spun in ways that reinforce the "cultural superiority" of the country of asylum to which refugees flee from their "oppressive" home societies (Freedman 2015). Such accounts leave little room for the complexity of youths' lives and identities and rarely reflect youths' desires for how (and by whom) their narratives are told.

The omission and incomplete or problematic representation of LGBTQ+ migrant youth have profound social implications. Appadurai (2004) asserts that the ability to assert one's voice – such as through practices of self-expression and self-representation within the public sphere – is an important cultural resource for mitigating social inequality. Asserting voice provides a critical pathway to civic engagement and public recognition, as well as for gaining access to material goods and services (Carbaugh and Plummer 1997; Crossley and Crossley 2001). Furthermore, it is central to subjective understandings of social belonging, including the capacity to imagine a future for oneself in contemporary society (Robards and et al. 2018). Voice is not a capacity that is strictly permitted or refused, but rather one that must be cultivated over time in ways that make sense within the unique cultural context of disenfranchised communities (e.g., performances, metaphor, rhetoric, public appeal) (McLeod 2011). It is also contingent on social actors' own personal beliefs that meaningful change from their involvement is a realistic possibility (Freire 2000).

Although traditional mainstream media sources have done little to transform and make visible LGBTQ+ youth narratives, "new media" practices (e.g., social media, Internet sites), in contrast, have ushered in a novel era of digital world-making and media democratization. The Internet has become a particularly powerful resource for the public engagement of marginalized populations, like LGBTQ+ youth, whose abilities otherwise to express their identities and assert their voices are often limited by profound social, structural, and physical constraints (e.g., stigma, violence, limited resources). Since the early 2000's, a growing literature demonstrates how LGBTQ+ youth have harnessed visual and virtual landscapes in order to bypass conventional social (adult-driven) controls over public access and engagement. Digital media and technology have created new opportunities for inclusion and belonging, for example,

through new modes of exploring non-heteronormative forms of gender and sexuality (Castañeda 2015; Mustanski, Lyons, and Garcia 2011), connecting with like-minded others (Russell 2002), and engaging in civic life (Hanckel and Morris 2014; Robards and et al. 2018).

Although risks and vulnerabilities that youth encounter through uncensored Internet usage have been discussed (McCosker, Vivienne, and Johns 2016) many scholars emphasize novel forms of sociality and public engagement that digital media has enabled. Some assert that youth participation in digital spaces has contributed to an emergent shift in ways that citizenship is being conceptualized and practiced, from a focus on the characteristics of individual citizen-subjects (e.g., national identity, patriotic values) to the "acts and deeds through which citizenship is collectively and individually produced, claimed and recognized" (Albury and Byron 2018: 170; Isin and Rygiel 2007; El-Haj 2009). A practice-centered framework of citizenship provides a broader conceptual lens for recognizing the political significance of visual- and network-oriented digital practices, with important implications for how claims to various forms of citizenship (e.g., sexual, environmental, consumer) are expressed and promulgated within the public arena (Isin and Rygiel 2007).

Despite substantial intellectual inquiry into the use of digital media and technology as an avenue of civic engagement for LGBTQ+ youth – particularly in relation to their efforts to advance claims for sexual and intimate citizenship – few studies have explored how digital citizenship practices intersect with other rights-based claims and modes of collective resilience, such as migration-related activism and organizing (Alencar 2020). A notable exception is scholarship on *UndocuQueer* activism in the United States (Unzueta Carrasco and Seif 2014; Pullen 2018), where youth's digital technology and social networking are foregrounded in their efforts to produce powerful new narratives of social change, relative to frameworks of social

justice and intersectionality. This movement has been shaped by the specific positionality of youth who have grown up as undocumented, queer individuals in the United States and who engage in a language of "coming out" as both a performative and political strategy.

That being said, it is important to highlight that the interpretive frameworks and strategies employed by *UndocQueer* youth activists do not necessarily reflect the experiences of differently-positioned migrants, such as those who arrive in the United States seeking asylum for gender- and sexuality-based discrimination and violence. My research expands the current scholarship on *UndocuQueer* and other migrant activism (Unzueta Carrasco and Seif 2014; Coddington and Mountz 2014; Witteborn 2015) by exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ migrant youth *en route*, with particular attention to the logics and affective registers through which digital media representations are discussed and engaged. This may help shed light on ways that LGBTQ+ migrant youth shift from the "imaginative space of open aspirations" to the exercise of direct political action (Appadurai, quoted in (Stade 2016: 215). Such an appearance bears important implications for the role of youth newcomers in the diversification and advancement of the LGBTQ migrant rights movements in the US and beyond.

LGBTQ Central American Youth

Drivers of Displacement and Mobility

In recent years, there has been significant upsurge in the forced displacement of LGBTQ+ youth in Central America. Between 2014 and 2016 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Tapachula, Mexico, documented a rise in cases of LGBTQ migrants from 1.6% to 10% (Winton 2019). Although reasons for this dramatic rise remain unclear, some scholars and activists attribute it to an overall increase in generalized violence, especially among youth populations, as well as more frequent targeting by gangs of

NGO workers and activists, which include those working in LGBTQ+ advocacy (UNHCR 2021). Furthermore, similar to GBV among cis-women, crimes against LGBTQ+ frequently go unpunished. According to a recent report by Human Rights Watch (2021), although there is a specific law in Honduras against bias-based crimes, including those based on gender- and sexuality-minority status, as of September 2020, not a single case had been convicted under the law. In addition to such factors that drive international displacement, I would also argue, based on findings from a study I co-conducted in 2018 (Wurtz & Wilkinson), that increased rates of LGBTQ out-migration is also directly related to the expansion of both formal and informal transnational LGBTQ networks in the region, including enhanced communication and collaboration across key institutional sites and social media networks.

Although there are no comprehensive data delineating LGBTQ+ cases by age, similar upward trends have been recorded elsewhere in Southern Mexico among unaccompanied minors (youth under 18 years old traveling without adult guardians). The number of unaccompanied minors detained by Mexico's National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración* – INM) increased from 10,700 in 2014 to just over 20,000 in 2015 (SEGOB 2017). Evidence demonstrates that compared to the increasingly high numbers of unaccompanied youth who cross into Mexico, very few actively pursue measures for gaining asylum in Mexico. Indeed, between 2015 and 2020, Mexico's INM registered over 66,000 unaccompanied minors from Central America, yet only 2,000 of them (less than 3 percent) sought asylum (UNICEF 2021).

Displacement of LGBTQ+ youth is driven by increased vulnerability across multiple social levels within Central American communities. Throughout their societies, deeply ingrained conservative and religious values sustain pervasive homophobia, alongside overall discriminatory legislation (Malta et al. 2019). As my findings reveal, and as has been

documented in other accounts (Winton 2019; Human Rights Watch 2020), occurrences of rejection, abandonment, and abuse by family members are common among Central American LGBTQ+ youth, often leading to homelessness and economic precarity of youth at an early age. LGBTQ+ youth are frequently targeted by gangs and organized crime because of their gender- or sexual-minority status and because gangs recognize that they have weak social support systems to protect them (Human Rights Watch 2020). Aside from blatant violence, they are often forced to sell drugs or become coerced lovers of gang members. At the very least, gang violence and other forms of persecution and discrimination limit socioeconomic opportunities, and make for short- and long-term trauma.

Economic marginalization is a particularly urgent issue among transgender youth because of the double burden of age and the visibility of their gender- and sexuality-based diversity, which makes it difficult to obtain employment. For many of these individuals, sex work is the only viable option they have for generating income, an occupation that increases their exposure to gangs, police, generalized violence, and negative health outcomes (e.g., STDs, HIV). Although there are no reliable data on LGBTQ+-related violence and crime in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, activists report growing concern with "transfemicide" or the homicide of transgender women because of their gender identity (Human Rights Watch 2020). Furthermore, violence and crime directed towards LGBTQ individuals are commonly met with widespread legal impunity and, in many cases, police officers, themselves, are the aggressors.

An additional barrier for LGBTQ+ young people, which has not been as widely or explicitly discussed in previous studies but emerged from my findings, is the lack of access to other social institutions outside of the family that non-LGBTQ youth in Central America commonly turn to for coping and support (especially when they do not have strong kin

networks). This includes organizations such as religious- and faith-based institutions, youth groups, and community-based programs that often fail to provide an inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ youth or, in some cases, actively discriminate against them. For example, Carlos, a twenthy-four-year-old gay man from Honduras described how he was expelled from his church order after he publicly revealed his sexual orientation. “They insisted that I had been taken over by a demon and would contaminate the congregation…because of this, my family disowned me.” Research in Central America has shown that community-based programs and organizations can prevent youth violence, crime, and displacement through support services such as educational opportunities, job training, and psychosocial support (WOLA 2008). The absence of supportive organizations within the community compounds other forms of vulnerability that LGBTQ youth experience (e.g., intra-familial violence, employment discrimination, homelessness), pushing them further into the margins towards internal displacement and out-migration.

I present the following case of Vanessa and Riana to shed some light on the multiple, often repetitive forms of violence and displacement faced by LGBTQ youth.

> When I met Vanessa and her twin sister, Riana, both twenty-five-year-old *chicas trans* from Honduras, they had just migrated to Mexico for the fourth time. In Honduras, they had left home in their teenage years because of conflicts with their father, who was not accepting of their transgender status. With limited options for employment, they engaged in survival sex work, in order to get by. They first fled Honduras after their brother had been tortured with hammers and eventually killed by gang members.
>
> In their most recent attempted migration, Vanessa and Riana were forced to flee the country yet again, after gangs attacked them and a group of friends one night, which resulted in the stabbing and hospitalization of one of their companions. Although this individual turned to law enforcement following the attack, the police did nothing more than accompany her to the hospital to receive care for her wounds. They failed to file an official report and even laughed at the injured young woman and her companions, calling them *maras* [members of the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) gang] and druggies.

> After years of seeing that the authorities could not do a thing *[“tantos años miramos que no pudieron hacer nada la autoridades*], Vanessa and Riana fled to Mexico, for the fourth time, along with four other *chicas trans.* They hoped to establish a new life in Mexico where they could be safe from violence and leave sex work behind. They both wanted to study law and human rights so that they “could help people like themselves, poor people from Central America…and that they could be somebody in life” [“*ayudarle a gente como nosotras, a gente pobre de Centroamérica... y para ser alguien más en nuestras vidas”*].
>
> However, Mexico could not offer such respite. After entering the country, Vanessa, Riana, and their companions were detained for nearly a month in the migrant detention center in Tapachula, where they were harassed, isolated, and abused by migration control agents; many of these abuses were directed towards them explicitly because of their transgender status (e.g., forced confinement of transgender women within a single cell “for their own protection,” specific derogatory comments about their gender- and sexual-minority status). Upon release from the detention center, they applied for refugee status, but were ultimately denied. With limited options for survival, they began renting a hotel room in Tapachula for $250 MX ($12 USD) per day in order to provide sexual services to clients. During this time, Riana was kidnapped and beaten by four men. They sought assistance from a center of human rights, but, again, there was no investigation or proper follow up. It was at this point, when the sisters were desperately looking for a way out, that they learned about the DSF caravan and began to hope for a new, more fortuitous journey that might await them.

Although many of the challenges faced by Vanessa and Riana are not singular to LGBTQ+, their story demonstrates how their vulnerability as migrants is compounded by their sexual- and gender-minority status, as well as their age. There are no reliable statistics on LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Central America. However, studies done in other countries have shown that youth who identify as LGBTQ+ have much higher risks of homelessness than their cis-gender counterparts (Morton et al. 2018; Shelton et al. 2018). In the case of Vanessa and Riana, familial conflict and subsequent homelessness at an early age served as a direct pathway to survival sex work and its associated risks. Furthermore, the intersection of youth and trans identities made them a target of both gang recruitment and homophobic hostility. Economic marginalization and the need to pursue survival sex work was also a constant struggle for

Vanessa and Riana, both prior to and after their arrival in Mexico. This situation was driven by the combination of homelessness, limited employment opportunities, and obstacles to gaining refugee status. Unlike other vulnerable populations, LGBTQ+ (esp. transgender) face near-insurmountable challenges in accessing institutional support that, for others, may serve to buffer such risks and vulnerabilities. In Tapachula, for example, there are special long-term shelters programs and opportunities specifically directed toward vulnerable women and nuclear, heterosexual family units. Such opportunities are often foreclosed to LGBTQ+, despite similar experiences of victimization as cis-women.

Challenges in Transit: Experience and Consequences of Institutional Exclusion

When young LGBTQ+ migrants arrive in Mexico, they find little recourse in established sites of institutional and humanitarian aid for migrants and refugees[17]. In fact, a common theme that surfaced in the testimonies of my interlocutors included repeated experiences of re-victimization, infantilization, hyper-vigilance, and voyeurism that occurred within institutionalized settings. There is currently an extensive network of primarily Catholic-run migrant shelters (*casas de migrantes*) throughout Mexico. These tend to run along dominant migratory routes and offer brief periods of respite, shelter, and food for migrants in-transit. For many migrants passing through Mexico, shelters serve as a critical point of contact for accessing information and resources, such as through opportunities for informal networking and solidarity (Frank-Vitale 2011), encounters with local residents (Balaguera 2017), and by generating "hope" and "empathy" among migrant communities (Vogt 2012). However, LGBTQ+ youth migrants are often barred from full access to such benefits by exclusionary shelter practices driven by conservative religious doctrine. (See work on the "La 72" migrant shelter for a notable exception: Wurtz & Wilkinson 2018.) In some cases, they are outright denied entry into migrant

shelters because of their LGBTQ+ status.

Neither COMAR nor migrant shelters routinely document information about migrants' self-selected gender identity or sexual orientation. Therefore, it is very difficult to assess how many LGBTQ+ have been accommodated by migrant aid institutions, as well as how many have sought and been granted asylum in Mexico. However, findings from qualitative studies, as well as my own work, reveal systematic marginalization and discrimination of LGBTQ+ (and especially transgender) migrants within institutional sites of migrant aid and assistance. In Southern Mexico, there is only one major migrant shelter that provides specialized housing and services to LGBTQ+ populations. It is far more common to encounter migrant shelters (which are predominantly religious-based) that overtly discriminate or impose overly restrictive shelter rules towards LGBTQ+ that replicate "carceral" conditions (Balaguera 2018b). In some cases, they are refused services, altogether. This includes one of the major migrant shelters in Tapachula, which currently bans transgender migrants because of assumptions about their sexual behavior and the "risk" that they pose towards increasing vulnerability of cis-gender women. As Balaguera (2018: 652) recounts from an interview with one of the shelter's staff members:

> In an interview, staff member Manuel explained that "transgenders" endanger the women because "they really are men," while also "provoking" the male population. For him, hosting "transgenders" would make it impossible for the shelter to guarantee the safety of (cis) guests or to enforce the rule that bans sexual encounters and expressions of affection.

Even when LGBTQ+-friendly shelters are available, they do not necessarily guarantee a safe space for these populations, who also face harassment and hostility from both fellow migrants residing in the shelter, as well as the surrounding community. For example, in Tijuana, following the arrival of the 2018 caravan, the group of DSF youth initially found housing at a shelter with LGBTQ+-inclusive services. However, only a couple days after their arrival, the

shelter was attacked and set on fire by unidentified perpetrators, who also tried, unsuccessfully, to break down the door of the unit where the DSF group was residing. The next day, after the attack became public and the DSF youth fled out of fear, a local church offered them temporary respite. However, once they arrived at the church and the priest saw that they were predominantly *chicas trans*, they were turned away because their identities did not align with the "beliefs of the Bible." Furthermore, LGBTQ+ likely face additional barriers to receiving asylum in Mexico. According to an interview with a lawyer who works at La 72, the most well-known and progressive LGBTQ+-inclusive shelter in Mexico, cases of LGBTQ individuals tend to take much longer than average cases, often spanning for up to a year, which often deters individuals from completing the refugee application process.

Such barriers to institutional support push LGBTQ+ migrants into deleterious cycles of continuous mobility and survival tactics. At the time of our meeting, most of my informants moved outside of formal avenues of refugee assistance and held precarious immigration status, either because they had been denied refugee status in Mexico, or because they had never applied or had ultimately abandoned their refugee cases. Several had been deported one or more times (from USA and/or Mexico) and were on their second or third migration; most had been living on their own for months, even years; and the majority had, at some point in their trajectories, engaged in sex work in order to survive. Since most were unable to or chose not to pursue legal, refugee status in Mexico, they were excluded from the most robust sources of institutional support available to Central Americans on the move, leading youth to seek support through alternative means.

The vulnerability of LGBTQ+ youth migrants is additionally compounded by their age.

Unaccompanied youth, comprising one of the most vulnerable sub-populations of Central American refugees, are particularly at risk for experiencing barriers to protection and aid driven by institutional policy and practice. According to a youth specialist in Tapachula's most prominent migrant rights organization, approximately 80% of youth that arrive at the southern border should qualify for refugee status. However, out of the 7,700 unaccompanied minors who were detained at the southern Mexico border between January and September of 2018, only 268 (35%) applied for refugee status (INM 2018); by the following May 2019, only 56 (20.8%) had received asylum or complementary protection (KIND 2019).

This phenomenon may be at least partially attributed to youths' avoidance of refugee agencies in order to prevent forced government institutionalization. According to Mexico refugee law, during the period in which unaccompanied minors apply for refugee status they are legally forced to reside in government-run shelters operated by Mexico's National System for Integral Family Development (*Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia)* (DIF). However, DIF shelters operate according to a closed-door policy, meaning that youth are not allowed to pass beyond shelter walls until their refugee case has been resolved. Despite the pressing circumstances of their migration, youth find themselves in detention-like conditions with extensive rules and regimented schedules that aim to keep them busy with menial tasks, which is often viewed by youth as a waste of time and a deterrent from attending to more pressing priorities. Their communication with the outside world is monitored and limited by facility policy, and they have little to no control over the progress of their asylum cases. Furthermore, they may be housed with former aggressors or recognized gang members and fear for their personal safety.

Inadequate institutional programming and resources for unaccompanied minors is further

exacerbated by policies that emphasize "family reunification", or the reuniting of unaccompanied minors with their legal guardians in their countries of origin, over granting them refugee status in Mexico. In 2015, 77% of unaccompanied minors detained by INM were deported for reasons of "family reunification" (Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2016). However, this completely neglects the fact that many unaccompanied minors are fleeing from situations of intra-familial violence, neglect, and disownment; many have no official family to "go home to" (personal testimony, FMC). As Doering-White reports: "This overwhelming prioritization of family reunification appears as a veiled euphemism for deportation and discourages young people from seeking the formal humanitarian recognition that they should be accorded" (Doering-White 2018: 45). In sum, "problematic" migrants are made to bear the blame within institutions for their purported negligence of or failure to comply with refugee procedures, rather than institutions exploring the structural and systemic shortcomings that define overly narrow parameters of inclusion. Such conditions are even more difficult for LGBTQ+ youth because of both institutional and peer-driven forms of harassment and systematic exclusion; they carry a double burden of being both trans and youth.

In light of these conditions, youth commonly opt for refugee case abandonment by escaping from DIF custody or avoiding the refugee application process altogether, rather than face indeterminate detainment and insecurity. Such was the case of Alberto, a twelve-year-old LGBTQ+ youth from Honduras, whom one of the LGBTQ+ migrant rights activists met in Mexico City when Alberto was "working the Alameda" [engaged in sex work in the Alameda Park in downtown Mexico City]. The activist shared: "If Alberto would have filed for refugee status, he would have been placed in DIF. He didn't want that. He'd rather sell his body and make a few bucks to stay at a hotel…to be independent."

Other government agencies for refugee assistance are equally unaccommodating, and many are outright abusive, especially for transgender youth. As one LGBTQ+ migrant advocate and researcher explained, when applying for legal status, for example, transgender refugees are frequently required to remove their makeup, pull up their hair, or change into a man's shirt in order to take official photos. As I have learned as an observer, government and law enforcement agents often refuse to address LGBTQ+ youth migrants by their chosen gender pronoun and may attempt to target or retaliate against LGBTQ+ youth advocates who attempt to intervene, such as in the case of the law enforcement agent in Tijuana who threatened to deport me after I repeatedly asked him to refer to one of the *chicas trans* by her chosen gender pronoun (she/her/hers). There have also been cases in which government authorities have discredited or attempted to minimalize LGBTQ+ youth's reports of violence or crime. An LGBTQ+ activist provided an exemplary story: when Yaneli, a *chica trans*, attempted to apply for the humanitarian visa after she was raped in southern Mexico, she was told by the State Prosecutor that she should not complain and that she should not pursue the visa. The prosecutor contrasted Yanelli's situation to that of a young migrant girl who had applied for the humanitarian visa after she was gang raped by seven men, trivializing Yanelli's suffering by saying that what had happened to her "didn't really count…"

(Mis)Representation and (In)Visibility of LGBTQ+ Youth

Informants described experiences of infantilization, discrimination, and voyerism as not only being produced and perpetuated by institutional practices, but also by journalists, researchers, and other social actors who were granted access to migrant youth through institutional collaboration. As described by Flotte, a Mexican-American transgender woman activist and researcher, and one of the original founders of the first Trans Gay Migrant Caravan

(*Diversidad Sin Fronteras -- DSF*):

> The normalizing of Central American LGBTQ suffering and pain was so common that refugees were often forced to exaggerate certain parts of their story or change the profile of their perpetrators in order to appear more legitimate to state, humanitarian, and media institutions. It is also important to mention that many migrants continuously criticized researchers and journalists for doing interviews without truly caring for the well-being of the people they interviewed…The *chicas* would read about their stories in newspapers and academic journals without context and always framed as disempowered, unorganized, and forgotten.

Indeed, many news articles and organizational reports about LGBTQ+ youth migrants en route (particularly prior to 2017) tend to focus on the extreme violence and brutality to which LGBTQ+ youth are consistently subjected during the course of their migratory journeys. Media representations frequently depict LGBTQ+ youth migrants as alone and in solitary conditions, and entail graphic details about the abuses they have suffered at the hands of gang members or organized crime. One news article, for example, published by the UNHCR in 2015, highlighted the case of a twenty-six-year-old transgender woman from El Salvador who was stabbed 58 times in gang attacks before she fled her country, "which left her with a necklace of scarring around her throat and slash wounds to her arm" (Fontanini 2015). Another article from San Antonio Express News features a photo of a 25-year-old transgender woman from Honduras after she sustained severe burns in 2016, which have now become "scars running up and down her forearms and across her face" (Foster-Frau 2019). In addition, it is not uncommon to read in media accounts about occurrences of rape and other forms of sexual violence among LGBTQ+ migrants, set alongside photos of LGBTQ individuals applying makeup or fixing their hair as a way to highlight hyper-sexuality and extravagant displays of gender-diversity.

Such images and representations may be fueled by the desires of journalists, researchers, and other social actors to expose human rights abuses and engender empathy across a broad, international readership. Indeed, mass media dissemination of personal stories and images of

individuals in deplorable situations (e.g., war, hunger, displacement) has become a powerful tool for raising awareness of global inequalities among news media consumers far removed from the realities of "suffering strangers" (Butt 2002). However, as Butt and others contend, this often comes at the expense of reducing rich, complicated human stories to emblematic images of suffering, thereby allowing a "sustained dependency between one group of people (i.e., those coded as needy) and another group of people (i.e., those coded as expert)" (2002: 17; Kleinman 1995; Malkki 1996). Furthermore, it obscures any sense of quotidian life and daily practices of individuals in exchange for sensationalist accounts.

This was often evidenced in my fieldwork by the internalization on the part of LGBTQ+ youth of the intrinsic "value" of their suffering and exoticized bodies. For example, in informal conversations with LGBTQ+ youth, it was not uncommon for them to adjust their clothing to uncover bodily scars that they sustained through acts of extreme violence. Such was the case when I first met Nola, a twenty-seven-year-old *chica trans* from Honduras, during the 2018 migrant caravan. Less than five minutes into our conversation and without prompting, she told me how she had been stabbed by local gang members when she refused to sell drugs for them out her small convenience store. She then pulled back the collar of her shirt to reveal a gnarly scar on her neck left by the puncture of the blade. Shortly after our conversation, as I made my way to a caravan "town hall" meeting, I passed another young transgender migrant being interviewed by a reporter from the United States. Suddenly I saw the youth pull up her shirt to disclose a long, deep scar from a gunshot wound to the abdomen; I could almost feel the visceral sense of shock emanating from the journalist, despite her stoic demeanor.

Indeed, in these encounters with youth it often seemed as if they were reciting rehearsed scripts: youth knew the stories that journalists were seeking and often complied with their

unspoken or more often explicit requests for intimate, bodily information. This occurred even while youth were actively trying to shift those narratives, which demonstrates how deeply such power dynamics are embedded and normalized within the migration-humanitarian-media complex.

In these accounts, we see how, across institutional contexts, representations of LGBTQ+ migrant youth are continuously hijacked and exploited in what Wright describes as "the making of the 'gay refugee' as a particular kind of cultural figure" (Wright 2018: 105). According to these imposed frameworks of representation LGBTQ+ young people are depicted as powerless, vulnerable victims void of political agency and personal autonomy, and are often overly defined by experiences of violence or through hyper-visibility of their sexual- and gender-diversity. This intersects with ageist assumptions about youth as individuals in need of adult protection and institutional dependence. Such accounts reflect a "savior mentality," within institutional practice and popular discourse, in which assertions about the need to "save" youth are set against the backdrop of the vulnerability and backwardness of the "primitive, uncivilized" societies from which they flee (Ticktin 2011; Wright 2018). Meanwhile, it is the journalists, researchers, humanitarian workers, and other types of "experts" who claim to speak for youth that ultimately capitalize on the authoritative power they possess over youth representation and voice. For example, prior to the first LGBTQ+ migrant caravan in 2017, DSF organizers fundraised for weeks in order to pay the $3,000 contract fee of a white, male "expert witness" who was hired to testify on behalf of detained transgender refugees in ICE custody. Careers are made and salaries supported by an industry that capitalizes on the tragedies of youth, with limited acknowledgment of or restitution for the consequences that such dynamics engender in the lives and futures possibilities of youth.

Practices of denied agency and misrepresentation that occur within sites of migrant assistance erode youth's trust in aid organizations. This serves to alienate youth from critical forms of social and cultural capital (e.g., information, networking), as well as material resources and service. As Cesar, a 22-year-old, gay, cis-gender man from Honduras and LGBTQ+-rights activist, commented: "They [LGBTQ+ youth migrants] get trapped in their own world, where they think outside (of this world) they are going to discriminate against me or try to hurt me or yell at me or whatever, and so it's better to stay hidden…. They say, 'I'm safe here, even though I'm confined' (*aqui me estoy bien, aunque este encerrado*)." This can set the stage for durable patterns of active avoidance by youth of public institutions and opportunities for social and civic engagement, which can have long-term consequences on physical health and wellbeing. As one study reported on the mental health of LGBTQ+ refugees: "When promises of safety are made and then broken, clinicians have noted lasting effects on the patient's ability to form relationships and seek help. This is especially troubling given that patients who access community resources and group activity have better outcomes than patients in isolation" (Messih 2016: 1-2).

When youth cannot find a space of safety within institutional settings, they look elsewhere for assistance and support. Sex work networks, for example, often serve as substantial sources of social and economic aid for LGBTQ+ youth, yet simultaneously entail significant risks of violence and crime. However, as I proceed to discuss in the remainder of the chapter, alternative options, such as sites and practices of grassroots organizing that do not conform to traditional institutional dynamics (e.g., bureaucratic procedures, non-LGBTQ+ staff), offer significant potential for filling that void and advancing their rights and wellbeing. Central to these endeavors are youth's involvement in self-representation and collective recognition within

the public sphere, communicated on *their own terms* and through their own chosen modalities (e.g., self-produced digital media). That which surfaces from these initiatives lies in stark contrast to the infantilizing, isolating practices of institutional representation and containment.

Grassroots organizing in Mexico: Belonging, Imagination, and Action

Setting the stage: engaging testimony through digital practices and platforms

In 2017 and 2018, approximately 20-30 LGBTQ+ migrant Central American youth per year participated in the LGBTQ+ *Diversidad Sin Fronteras* (DSF) [Diversity Without Borders] migrant caravans. Although DSF participants organized and represented themselves as an autonomous movement, they joined larger migrant caravans at distinct points in the caravan trajectory, which began at the southern Mexico border and ended in Tijuana. However, it is important to note that DSF organizing stemmed from a longer history of LGBTQ migrant activism in Mexico, including advocacy events that directly preceded the caravans in 2016 (described below).

Grassroots organizing with LGBTQ+ migrant youth is rooted in the efforts of independent LGBTQ-rights activists to address the gaping lack of support and accompaniment of associated youth in the course of their migrant trajectories. But unlike many of the overarching goals and practices within typical sites of migrant and refugee aid in Mexico, the objectives of LGBTQ+ organizers were not limited to meeting basic needs (e.g., food and accommodations): their efforts also included a broader agenda of LGBTQ+ migrant rights advocacy through the direct participation and self-representation of youth migrants themselves.

This began with a public awareness campaign in 2016, initiated by LGBTQ+ rights organizers with a group of LGBTQ+ youth migrants temporarily residing in the La 72-migrant shelter in Tenosique, Tabasco, near the southern Mexico border. Organizers first conducted

group sessions with youth to generate discourse about their perceived needs and desires, as well as the barriers they encountered in meeting those objectives. In-depth group discussions helped to establish a sense of collective identity. They also allowed an opportunity for youth to master the discursive frameworks and approaches to mobilization that made the most sense to them within the context of their daily lives and intimate social worlds.

At the center of these discussions were key themes addressing the misrepresentation, infantilization and denied agency of LGBTQ+ youth that occurred across institutions of migrant assistance and media documentation (e.g., refugee assistance institutions, migrant shelters, media). For example, as one of the organizers relayed, after a two-hour discussion about the campaign motto, a sixteen-year-old transgender youth suggested: "*No tenemos que ser agredidos para que nos pongan atención*" ["We don't have to be assaulted for you to pay attention to us"]. This posed a direct challenge to the "unethical knowledge extraction" and representation of LGBTQ migrants that occur en route, as well as the normalization and capitalization of suffering of LGBTQ bodies inflicted by state and social institutions.

In response, the group then produced a series of audio- and video-recorded interviews and photographs that centered on their own personal, lived experiences as LGBTQ+ youth migrants. These were later disseminated through social media sites and networks (e.g., Facebook, You Tube) as part of a public awareness campaign and broader collective struggle for social transformation and equality. As Flotte relays:

> By mobilizing their stories to ensure their own well-being before prioritizing the institutional needs of humanitarianism, journalism and academia, the group made a direct action-based critique of how LGBTQ Central America migrant stories are gathered, written and proliferated in Mexico and everywhere else in the world. I understand this collective move as one that seeks to move away from cis-heteronormative voyeurism and into a practice of trans queer ownership of their life stories.

Youth's engagement with digital media practices and technology helped generate critical dialogue and reflexivity among youth. Such dynamics are akin to pedagogical approaches of *testimonio*[18] – a genre of critical autobiographical storytelling with deep roots in Latin American and *chicano/chicana* human rights struggles (Moraga & Anzaldua 1983; Latina Feminist Group 2001). By reclaiming authority over their own life narratives, youth explored concepts of identity, inequality, and social change, while fomenting a sense of solidarity and shared struggle. Furthermore, as I describe in the subsequent section, these initial organizing efforts helped set the stage for key modes of engagement in political discourse and practice among LGBTQ+ youth that unfolded during the DWF migrant caravan movements in 2017 and 2018 – events that would come to take on a central role in shifting collective representation and forms of recognition.

Going global: digital advocacy and collective mobilization in the DSF migrant caravan movement

Digital media and technologies, particularly in the form of photography, video, and social media communications were endorsed by many youth and activists as a primary avenue through which to exercise *their right* to document (*el derecho poder documentar)* and disseminate the events and stories of their lives– on their own terms and in their own words – and in ways that they felt represented their views and aspirations. Digital engagement was perceived as a powerful means of shifting dominant representations of LGBTQ+ migrants as isolated, vulnerable, unorganized, and sorrowful "victims" in order to configure new narratives based on solidarity, community, and empowerment. In many accounts of LGBTQ+ youth practices of digital advocacy, their actions and influence seem primarily confined to the digital worlds in which they operate (versus concrete political engagement and outcomes) (Pullen 2018). In contrast, my interlocutors' testimonies reveal the use of digital media and technology as

complementary practices of civic engagement that occur alongside and in coordination with direct collective action. Briana's story is a case in point.

Briana is a Black, Garifuna *chicas trans* in her mid-twenties from Honduras. In Honduras, she had been a protected witness against perpetrators of sex trafficking and child pornography. She was promised protection by the Honduran government, but in a country plagued by institutional weakness and political corruption, she knew that if she stayed in Honduras, her life would always be at risk. After another protected witness in her case was found murdered, Briana fled the country.

After arriving in Mexico, Briana lived in Guadalajara for the next three years. She had struggled to find work "because of the color of my skin," but was able to make ends meet by working in commercial sex trade. In 2016, Briana got to know Flotte and other LGBTQ+ rights organizers through her participation in the 2016 public awareness campaign in southern Mexico. Following this campaign, even though she and the others went their separate ways, she stayed in touch with organizers and other LGBTQ+ youth migrants via Facebook, which facilitated her participation and organizing role in the 2018 DSF Caravan. This included a subsequent video campaign spearheaded by Briana and two other LGBTQ+ migrant youth, along with the support of the DSF organizers. This video was circulated through Facebook and other social media platforms to raise funds to cover the expenses of caravan participation (for example, transportation, food, accommodations). It also helped to establish a collective identity of DSF caravan members, which was critical to the group's objectives to be recognized as an organized collective – distinct, yet commensurate, with the broader caravan movement. Geni, a *chica trans* in her mid-twenties and from Honduras, was one of Briana's collaborators in the video campaign. She commented:

> It was a reflection of our intelligence and capability [as a group]. It showed that we were organized, that we were empowered, and that we knew our rights and held a firm position [in our views]. Even though they [society] didn't want to take us seriously, and they tried to discriminate against us and to make fools of us, we showed them that we weren't what they believed.

Here, Geni is speaking directly against dominant representations of LGBTQ+ migrant youth as either "disempowered, unorganized, and forgotten" (Flotte, 2018) or an exoticized spectacle, overly defined by the visibility of their gender- and sexuality-based diversity. By presenting themselves as an organized group, they asserted a collective voice and made claims for inclusion. Through drew upon image and action to shift the public narrative from the image of the poor migrant *("pobrecito migrante")* to an LGBTQ+ community and family ("*una comunidad LGBTQ…una familia*").

During the course of the DSF caravan, Briana and many of her companions came to think of themselves as activists (DSF organizers, 2018), and they played a central role in the group's efforts to assert demands for respect and recognition. For example, at the onset of the large-scale migrant caravan, the *chicas trans* experienced resistance and bullying from non-LGBTQ+ *caravaneros.* Equipped with a language of rights and solidarity the *chicas* made consistent efforts to demand respect for their gender and sexuality-based rights and assert a collective identity. This included direct, concrete actions in the caravan, such as standing in the food distribution line designated for women or making requests to organizers that they be addressed by the proper gender pronoun. It also entailed distinct tactics for engaging broader transnational LGBTQ advocacy networks through digital media and communication practices, such as harnessing media exposure and communication with US-based LGBTQ+-supportive journalists and NGOs in order to acquire resources and assistance. Such actions could be conceptualized as a form of "anticipatory politics," or an embryonic, practice-based form of what youth are

advocating for on a structural level (Vygotsky 1997, 2004; Stetsenko 2015).

According to Briana, by the end of the caravan, the *chicas trans* observed a noticeable shift in how they were treated by fellow *caravaneros* and non-LGBTQ+ organizers. As she explained, "Finally they started to listen to us; they realized that we, as an LGBTQ+ group, had a vote, that we had a voice, and that we could have an opinion…finally they listened" *("…que teníamos votos que teníamos voz y que podíamos opinar, así como venía un grupo LGBT"*). Visible outcomes to their collective struggles reinforced ongoing solidarity and activism that would eventually transcend physical borders and go beyond the organized efforts of the caravan movement (as a physical collective entity), including the hunger strike initiated by LGBTQ+ youth in the ICE detention center to protest the medical negligence of Roxana's deteriorating health condition.

Frameworks of Digital Advocacy

LGBTQ+ migrant youth demonstrated sustained participation in a variety of forms of direct collective action and mobilization. However, their discussions of representation in and engagement with digital media and technology provide a particularly insightful framework for understanding the logics and objectives of their advocacy efforts. Three dominant themes surfaced from conversations about youth's engagement with digital media and technology: First, visibility of identity and belonging, second, generating understanding and shared struggle through personal testimony, and third, hope and futurity.

Visibility of Identity and Belonging

The first theme centered on youths' efforts to express their identities with pride and visibility, an opportunity that they were rarely afforded in their countries of origin. In the case of LGBTQ+ youth migrants, although the pursuit of greater gender- and sexual-based freedom is

not always the primary driver behind the decision to migrate, non-normative sexuality is intimately threaded through every step of the journey. For many, the emotional condition of displacement begins long before their migratory departure, often stemming from experiences of familial rejection, homelessness, identity concealment, and other forms of social alienation and precarity (Winton 2019). Migration, therefore, may present new opportunities to carve out spaces of social inclusion or to pursue sexual projects during formative years of self-exploration and growth. Some may, for example, find the space to test new sexual identities and practices through emergent relationships or new modes of self-expression and performativity. As Ivan, one of the DSF activists recounted:

> Many of them [LGBTQ+ youth migrants] didn't have the possibility to express their identities in their countries of origin. So, when they arrive in Mexico they have the opportunity to be able to wear makeup, or to come out of the closet, and to show themselves to the world in the way that they want to be seen.

Migration also provides the opportunity to form chosen families and communities of belonging. As Flotte describes about the solidarity that she has observed among the *chicas trans*.

> [Many *chicas trans*] were kicked out of their homes when they were really young. So they had this lack of family affection. And I think that's what made them unite…it's a different way of forming a family. And if you see, we all call each other "sister" *("Hermana").* Because we lack that kind of family affection…a lot of our immediate family have rejected us, so we have to find another way of caring for each other.

As this account demonstrates, by calling each other "*Hermana*" (sister), trans-gender women perform and validate non-heteronormative gender identity, while simultaneously appropriating a term of endearment to denote the comfort and familiarity that is shared among them. As a group they demonstrate the same practices of mutual support and shared space of any other migrant family in route. They share sleeping quarters, commiserate together, and make decisions based on the best interests of the group, rather than of individuals. For example, during

the caravan, they opted to all travel atop the northbound freight train (*La Bestia*), rather than split up so that only some of the group could have seats in a shared van. Solidarity among all was prioritized over the increased security and comfort of a few. Such practices provide the relational contexts that signify family to a broader public. However, in doing so, notions of "identity" and "family" are radically re-conceptualized, demonstrating the political potency of non-heteronormative familial configurations. Such shifts towards belonging are not only a tool of survival, but also of resistance, as LGBTQ+ youth endeavor to build (and maintain) intimate ties unbound by patriarchal and nation-state boundaries.

Digital media were viewed by youth and activists as a powerful medium to reinforce resistance through community and kinship by making visible the sense of joy, love, and the solidarity that they imagined and experienced as a shared community. As one of the DSF caravan activists related:

> I take a lot of group shots…because going out as a group is to breathe, to laugh, to feel free. It doesn't matter what you do – you do your thing and we are going to watch out for you; you are not alone. It's like these photos here [showing some prints] – on this day, several of the *chicas* went out together to some concert. I don't remember who it was – it certainly wasn't the best concert in the world – but they were totally floored [by the experience] because many of them had never gone out like that [dressed as trans women], like, 'you think I'm going out in the streets like that?'

Group interviews and photo shoots with the media became a common tactic among the *chicas trans* as a way to promote pride, solidarity, and collective identity among the tight-knit group, a powerful image that starkly contrasts with popular narratives of transgender individuals that circulate within the public imaginary. As one heteronormative, cis-gender, middle class Mexican man commented when I showed him the photo of some of the *chicas trans*: "Wow, I've never seen a photo like that of trans individuals, in a group. They seem so happy, so at ease, so *natural.* They're a family. And when I look at this photo, the first thing I think of is the

happiness of a family, not their sexuality. It makes them more relatable, more like any other person, in my mind."

Generating Understanding and Shared Struggle through Personal Testimony

Digital media and photography were also viewed as an important means through which to transmit the power of bearing witness through personal, embodied experience. When subjects speak about an event in terms of witness, rather than spectator, their narratives generate a sense of authenticity, "reflecting their personal emotions not only as autobiographical subjects sharing feelings and responses but also in establishing the significance of the event" (Pullen 2018: 191). Speaking about their personal experiences was viewed by interlocutors as fundamental to their advocacy endeavors to meaningfully shift dominant public narratives about LGBTQ+ migrant youth and to generate empathy (rather than pity) among host-country populations. As Britani explained, "It's so that those countries where we are seeking assistance see our faces…see that we are speaking from heart to heart *("que miren como les estamos hablando de corazón a corazón"),* and that they understand our realities."

Similarly, an emphasis on lived experience was seen as a way to promote intersectional perspectives of youth's lives that account for the complexity of their identities, and which may help generate a sense of commonality and shared struggle, rather than difference, across sub-groups and communities. For example, when asked about the role of photography and media technology in grassroots organizing for LGBTQ+ youth migrants, one of the DSF activists retrieved a photo from his backpack and began to talk me through the scenario. In the main frame of the photo, Alicia, one of the *chicas trans*, is seated atop La Bestia. Shea holds a sandwich in one hand and with the other grasps tightly to the metal grid of the train. The activist relays:

> I remember riding atop the train with Alicia…There were so many people and we had so many things and so little space. And Alicia clung to the grid of the train in order to eat her sandwich…she was scared because we felt like we were going to fall and each moment it seemed to get worse… This photo is fascinating to me because it's about sheer survival: clinging to the train so not to fall; clinging on to be able to eat; clinging on in order to be with everyone and to not lose sight of the horizon. This moment really struck me…who wouldn't hold on to live?

Hope and Futurity

Youth also discussed digital media as a way to make important political commentary on a global stage about the myriad structures of social inequality and oppression to which they are continuously subjected (and endeavor to resist). This was perceived as a powerful way of conveying messages of hope and futurity to other marginalized youth. The ability to form alternate visions of the future and to position oneself and one's community within that imagined futurity is critical to processes of reflexivity and youth's perceived potency of action.

One image that was extensively discussed by the *chicas trans* with whom I traveled was one taken shortly after our arrival to Tijuana following the 2018 caravan. The entire caravan had gathered at Friendship Park, the beachside park built alongside the border wall in Tijuana, to celebrate the arrival of the caravan. There was a strong presence of journalists from around the world who had arrived to capture the event, along with a number of invited speakers, activists and supporters, and the hundreds of migrants who had made the over month-long trek to the border. After a spontaneous dance party and photo shoot on the beach by the wall, a few of the *chicas trans* darted off from the group and scaled the border wall, until they were able to sit atop it, literally straddling the line between national territories. As a result of the dozens of international journalists present at the event, the photo of Briana in this moment, with her fist raised and the Honduran flag blowing in the wind, went viral and was circulated through news channels around the world.

Reflecting on the significance of the photo, one of the *chicas* trans, Genesis, shared: "This image is really powerful…because it was captured precisely in this moment of international conflict, and now it has incredible power…We left [our countries] without a cent, but we made it, against all odds, against two powerful nations, even though we went hoarse from the train, we made it to Tijuana!". When I then asked the *chicas* what they hoped that this photo would convey to other youth migrants, Briana, chimed in: "That they can make it, so to not limit themselves or doubt themselves, and that migration is the most normal thing in the world, so to not be afraid."

For many youth, organizing practices and activities intervene at a critical moment of personal transformation and change in their lives, conditions which may, in some cases, facilitate or even amplify social justice efforts. This highlights important, yet often overlooked, insights into the political potency of transit migration. While there is no denying the devastation that displacement wreaks on the lives of migrants and their communities, it can also become a source of radical social and political transformation. Through the rupture of displacement, fault lines of inequality are exposed and new routes may emerge for youth to engage society and imagine future life trajectories.

Concepts of hope and futurity are central to these accounts. Frameworks that center on the transformative aspects of migration often discuss migrant motivations and desires as part of an ongoing process of reaffirming one's status "as a becoming-subject" (Collins 2018). In addition to a psychological or existential sense, it is also intimately tied to the material resources and opportunities, such as physical mobility and economic support, which make such imaginings possible (Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010). Hope, for example, according to Hage, is about "one's sense of the possibilities that life can offer. Its enemy is a sense of entrapment, of having

nowhere to go, not a sense of poverty" (Hage 2003: 20). DSF caravan grassroots organizing was so powerful because it helped youth to identify the deeply rooted structural inequalities that engendered their displacement, paired with concrete tools for engaging and working to transform pathways of social injustice. They thereby transcended ideas of hope and futurity from a primarily conceptual, aspirational domain to realizable action.

From voice to collective action

Only a few weeks after Roxana's death, a memorial was raised in her honor at a photo exposition on Central American migration that was hosted by the Museum of Anthropology in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. The memorial featured a large colored photo of Roxana that was taken during the migrant caravan, just weeks before she died, fastened to a large white canvas. The photo was accompanied by colorful stenciled flowers painted directly onto the canvas, and a verse, painted in black, from the well-known poem "Don't Give Up" by Mario Benedetti:

> …even if the cold burns
> even if fear bites
> even if the sun hides away and the wind goes silent
> **there is still fire in your soul**
> **there is still life in your dreams…**
>
> *…aunque el frío queme*
> *aunque el miedo muerda*
> *aunque el sol se esconda y se calle el viento*
> ***aún hay fuego en tu alma***
> ***aún hay vida en tus sueños…***

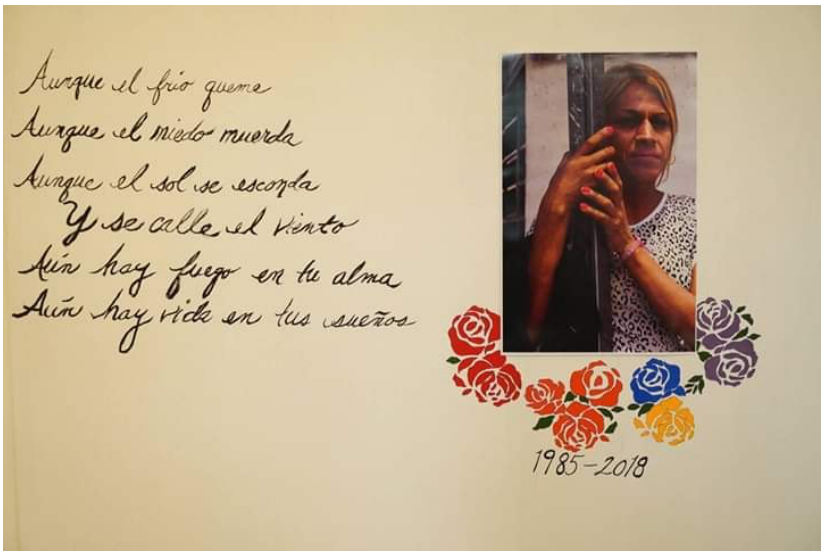

Figure Six: Photograph of memorial to Roxanne displayed at the photo exhibition on migration at the Museum of Anthropology in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, 2018 (photograph by author)

The dreams, and the death, of Roxana have not been forgotten. Roxana's *hermanas* embody the life in her dreams; they continue to struggle to tell their stories and to actively participate in direct advocacy work for LGBTQ youth and migrant communities on both sides of the US-Mexico border. For example, as she awaits her US asylum case adjudication while living in Austin, Texas, Briana continues to draw upon organizing practices and networks as both a continuation of advocacy efforts, as well as a source of survival. This includes spearheading fundraisers, such as go-fund-me projects, and by hosting events and dinners to raise money for rent; providing networking and counsel to other Central American youth migrants in transit (via social media and telephone); and engaging in mutual care, solidarity, and ongoing contact with former *caravaneros*. She is currently working with the LGBTQ community in Austin to establish an organization for black trans women "in honor of our sister Roxana Hernandez." Furthermore, along with several of her fellow DSF *caravaneros*, Briana has become an active member of *TQLM* (Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement*)*: one of the most active US-based organizations for the rights of LGBTQ Latinxs. Key organizational initiatives include efforts to

abolish ICE and oppose detention center conditions; provide humanitarian, legal, and medical support for asylum seekers; and host national conventions and retreats to promote "healing and liberation" for LGBTQ individuals who have experienced forced displacement.

TQLM has proved a powerful alliance for the *chicas trans* and a particularly accommodating organizational base for LGBT Latinx migrant youth, in general, because of the organization's strong intersectional approach. In workshops and events critical dialogue is generated about the intersections of gender and sexuality with other subject positions, such as race and ethnicity, and often set against the sociohistorical context, such as colonization and capitalism. Furthermore, the organization values the perspectives and knowledge of immigrants and their communities, and actively works toward creating opportunities for cultural and dialogical exchange. *Chicas trans* and other *caravaneros* have played particularly strong roles in sharing insights gained through their experiences in the caravan, and they represent vital models of resilience and solidarity. As one of the *La Familia* coordinators conveyed:

> I think what we've learned about organizing has been from *them*…I think there's an added layer for their surviving in their economies and being houseless at such a young age without family support. So, for a lot of the folks we know, they've already engaged in some sort of community building, organizing, and things like that. And so we get the benefit of learning from them firsthand. Like, how does someone who lives in a country that doesn't allow HIV medication…create those spaces [of inclusion and solidarity]? (original emphasis)

In addition to their ongoing role in collective action and organizing, the efforts of LGBTQ youth in the 2017 and 2018 DSF caravans continues to echo through documentary memory and media representation. Beginning in 2017, there is a significant, visible shift in the depiction of LGBTQ migrants in transit through the Americas. In place of images and stories that predominantly depict LGBTQ migrants in solitary conditions or as lone victims of violence and abuse, media accounts increasingly feature LGBTQ migrants engaged in activist efforts and

networks of solidarity, with a surge of images that center on concepts of empowerment, agency, and intimacy (e.g., care, love, friendship).

Throughout this chapter I have detailed the central role of Central American LGBTQ migrant youth's involvement in grassroots organizing in Mexico in the forging of their political consciousness and ongoing civic engagement. Having the social, affective, and imaginative space to reflect on the conditions of their displacement and the crucial life changes they were undergoing became a powerful tool for generating critical dialogue and asserting voice on a global stage through direct collective action. Their use of digital media through self-produced documentary works, as well as their strategic engagement with mass media, proved particularly effective tools for publicizing the key issues that affect their communities and for finding the means to communicate and respond to these issues across time and space.

In-transit migratory experiences of LGBTQ youth are rarely discussed beyond frameworks of violence and vulnerability. However, as my findings demonstrate, attention to the events and encounters that unfold during the course of youth's migrant trajectories sheds light on a far more deeply nuanced and complex spectrum of experience among LGBTQ youth than what is portrayed in the extant literature. This study also highlights the potentially transformative role of sites and interventions of support that youth engage en route in promoting the autonomy, well being, and future outcomes of these young people. Given that the grassroots efforts described in this study are by far the exception and that similar systems of support scarcely exist in Mexico, this research also calls attention to the dire need for organizational intervention – not only to help LGBTQ migrant youth meet basic needs of safety and survival in their trajectories, but also to cultivate spaces of belonging, critical discourse, and civic engagement, too.

As Latinxs continue to take on a more central role in LGBTQ activism in the US, the

unique experiences, concerns, and challenges of immigrant youth will make a valuable contribution to a more inclusive and intersectional approach to advancing the LGBT rights agenda. As my research has shown, many LGBT youth immigrants, especially those who have already participated in some form of grassroots organizing and collective action prior to arrival to the United States, may be able to share important skill sets and unique insights to which US-born youth might not otherwise be exposed. Furthermore, the diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds of immigrant youth may facilitate their ability to make substantial conceptual links and collaborative ties across disparate social movements, such as those focused on police violence and racism, which could help to build a more unified and inclusive liberation movement.

Conclusion

PROMISES AND PERILS OF A TRANSNATIONAL REFUGEE REGIME

Political and Institutional Failures in the Mexico Borderlands

On January 25th, 2019, the Trump administration implemented the "Migration Protection Protocols" (MPP) (commonly referred to as "Remain in Mexico" policies), forcing thousands of asylum seekers, including over 10,000 unaccompanied children, to reside along the US-Mexico border while awaiting hearings on their claims. Since that time, Human Rights First has documented over 1,500 cases of rape, kidnapping, and assault among those awaiting asylum hearings (Human Rights First 2021). MMP is firmly centered in US policy –justified during the last year of the Trump administration as a public health measure to slow the spread of COVID-19. However, critics also call attention to the role that the Mexican government has played in allowing MPP to operate effectively, both through compliance with US policy, as well as widespread failure of Mexican officials to take measures to prevent and address cases of victimization of asylum seekers within Mexican territory (including those in which the perpetrators are police and migration agents). Furthermore, to date, the Mexican government has failed to develop any program to support asylum seekers who have been returned to Mexico as a result of the MPP (Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2020).

The extensive media coverage of the devastating consequences of MPP along the border has been critical to exposing yet another failure of the US's broken and profoundly inhumane system of migration and refugee regulation. However, what has been sorely overlooked within public discourse and media coverage surrounding MPP is the fact that the current situation on the US-Mexico border barely brushes the surface of a much more pervasive, systematic and long-standing problem along the *southern* Mexico border and Mexican in-country transit zones. This

is an issue that has been significantly intensified by the externalization of US migration control policies and is reflective of broader global dynamics that have been in play in such regions as Europe for years (Spijkerboer 2018).

To my knowledge there are no systematic data available for comparison on rates of violence and crime among migrants awaiting refugee case resolution along Mexico's southern border. However, based on my observations during the twelve months in Tapachula, I found that the case of prolonged immobilization and legal entrapment within the Southern Mexico border region was by far the rule, rather than the exception. For many of these immobilized migrants whom I came to know, initial stays in Tapachula extended into months, even years, as a result of diverse and often intersecting factors. This includes outright denial of refugee status, complicated bureaucratic procedures (e.g., correcting mistaken information on a passport), and personal life course events that delayed their onward trajectories (e.g., pregnancy, death of a loved one). Under such circumstances, migrants find themselves in a perpetual state of social and existential liminality: they are unable to go back to their home communities, yet lack the legal, economic, or social capital (or, more likely, a combination of the three) either to move forward or to effectively integrate within their current surroundings. Life goes on within spaces of immobility, but it's a life in which one's ability to meet basic human needs, let alone personal and social aspirations, is continuously beyond one's grasp.

These migrants, immobilized and alienated along the southern Mexico border, are the forgotten ones – the ones who for whatever reasons were unable to conform to the precise timelines, strict requirements, or social expectations of those managing the refugee regime, and were therefore excluded or expelled from its reach. They are the ones who fall through the cracks

and who never make it far enough north to even try their hand at the MPP. They are a critical part of the story that rarely gets told.

Paradoxes of Protection

In my research, I found that immobilization along the southern Mexico border commonly results in increased exposure to traumatizing acts of violence and crime directed toward asylum seekers, similar to what has been tracked during MPP on Mexico's northern border. There is also overwhelming evidence of the dangers that migrants face while traveling between borders (Amnesty International 2018; MSF 2019; Leyva-Flores et al. 2019; Sandin 2020). Political refusal to address these atrocities and to prevent them from reoccurring has often been justified by the argument that these are the consequences of illegal action (read: enter at your own risk) by people who are simply passing through Mexico in transit to the United States. As I discussed in **Chapter One** in the historical overview of Central American migration, this is not a new phenomenon; similar claims were made in the 1980s and 1990s to justify Mexico's failure to provide humanitarian aid and other forms of recourse for Central Americans fleeing civil war and political persecution. At this time, it is just as likely, if not more probable, that migrants continued their journey north because of the inhospitable conditions imposed by Mexico, compared to more traditional "pull" factors in the United States (e.g., labor opportunities, social networks) (Garcia 2006).

Since the early 2000s and the introduction of new refugee legislation, Mexico has taken significant strides to improve legal and humanitarian responses to people seeking international protection. However, the implementation of the rights and provisions formalized within the law continues to be seriously undermined by structural constraints, such as a lack of funding and human resources for COMAR, as well as external pressure from the United States on Mexico to

enact heightened measures of border militarization and migration control. Furthermore, as I have demonstrated throughout this study, even within institutions specifically designed to protect and provide for migrants seeking international protection, systematic forms of migrant vulnerability and exclusion continue to be reproduced. This is not solely an issue of financial and structural limitations, but also the result of productive forms of power shaped through social and cultural processes within local moral worlds of borderland life (e.g., institutional culture, socio-cultural context and geographic specificities of the surrounding environment, regional political dynamics).

In his work on humanitarianism, Redfield argues that associated interventions often foster "survival within wider circumstances that do not favor it" (Redfield 2005: 344). Although my research also illuminates paradoxes of humanitarian intervention, it takes Redfield's analysis a step further. There is no doubt that humanitarian interventions in the Mexico borderlands promote basic human survival without addressing root causes of inequality and suffering. However, as I have found, in many cases, interventions under the aegis of care and protection actually *contribute* to the unfavorable circumstances that negate survival's success.

For example, Mexico claims to have the resources and capacity to function as a country of asylum. Proponents may point to the expansive network of non-governmental and international organizations (e.g., UNHCR) that has surfaced within key transit zones in southern Mexico to support these claims. However, reports have shown that Mexico severely lacks the monetary resources and personnel to process more than even a "tiny fraction" of cases of refugees seeking international protection (Meyer 2019). This has resulted in long delays of forced immobilization of refugee applicants under unbearable conditions. One of my interlocutors went as far as to describe these conditions as constituting "psychological torture" of

refugees.

As I discuss in **Chapter Three** on the social and subjective consequences of prolonged waiting for refugee status, the conditions that migrants are forced to endure throughout these periods (esp., uncertainty, violence, lack of agency), steer migrants towards specific emotional, psychological, and physical outcomes that often align with nationalist agendas of migrant containment and deterrence. In some cases, women were able to positively cope with the emotional angst of immobilization by integrating experiences of waiting into broader life narratives, such as within frameworks of self-empowerment and culturally reinforced understandings of sacrificial motherhood. However, many women resorted to alternative trajectories of increased vulnerability and risk, such as abandoning their refugee case applications to travel covertly or engaging in illicit activity (e.g., drug trade, sex work) to make ends meet after the limited well of humanitarian aid quickly ran dry.

The challenges of prolonged immobilization and confinement within border zones were often compounded by defective migrant aid institutions that not only failed to meet the needs of migrants for support and assistance, but also exacerbated or reproduced processes of victimization and marginalization. This was especially the case among populations with distinct vulnerabilities (e.g., youth, pregnant women, women with children) who were more reliant on institutional intervention. I demonstrate this in **Chapter Two** through the examination of institutional responses to women migrants who have endured GBV. For many of these women, processes of institutional power and subordination often took shape and manifested through ways in which women's testimonies of violence were interpreted and made legible within institutional sites. There are, of course, instances of outright denial of services by institutions, as well as institutional coercion. However, I contend that there are also subtler forces at play in the

dynamics and management of humanitarian intervention, which are rooted in a specific form of epistemic injustice: strictly regulating how certain kinds of knowledge are engaged and recognized. Such processes are directly informed by subjective judgments and prejudices by institutional actors toward the populations they serve, which can make a significant impact on migrants' access to important resources and services. I have, for example, observed negative perceptions of individual refugees by institutional staff result in delayed case review; withdrawn legal support because individuals are labeled as gang affiliates; interpersonal conflict; and feelings of mistrust, fear, and lack of autonomy that encourage migrants to flee shelters and abandon refugee cases.

The Migrant Caravan Movement: Shaping Lives and Politics *in Motion*

In my analysis, I have consistently described a grim reality for those migrants immobilized within the Mexico borderlands. However, during the time that I was there, I also saw a fierce ray of hope and a new world of possibility arise for many migrants caught in the throes of immobilization and entrapment: the migrant caravan movement. No longer facing the extensive risks entailed by traveling alone without legal status, and with the watchful eye and advocacy of caravan organizers and media to support them, migrants felt empowered to foster a new vision, a new narrative, of a mobile Otherwise. This narrative, which emphasizes ideas of social justice, empowerment, and liberation of an oppressed people ran in direct opposition to dominant discourse that commonly frames transit migrants in polarized terms of either threatening criminals or helpless victims.

Although safe passage through Mexico was the central objective of the caravan movement, along with political protest of the horrendous conditions that refugees face while in transit, I found in my research that the caravan also proved to be a significant source of

community building, resilience, and coping for many of the participants. Such insight is often alluded to in other accounts but rarely explored as the center of analysis. To this end, in **Chapters Four and Five**, I draw on core anthropological concepts, such as shared identity, embodiment, self-representation, spirituality and existentiality to present alternative frameworks for understanding the potency of collective migrant mobility.

A predominant theme running across both chapters is the role of *conscientization* (Pinto 1961; Freire 2000), or the raising of awareness of fundamental roots of inequality and oppression. This was often realized in the caravan through discursive and embodied practices that generated a sense of solidarity, pride, collective identity and visibility of a unified, mobile migrant community. Although media attention and direct political action were important to the movement's success, I argue that it was through the quotidian practices (e.g., cooking, haircuts, social diversion) and culturally distinct modes of representation and signification (e.g., promotion of faith, national pride, humor) deployed through various means during the course of the caravan that fueled personally and psychologically transformative processes of coping and resilience.

Liberation psychologists assert that the disavowal of the roots and realities of trauma is key to sustaining terror and victimization. Therefore, public recognition and visibility of what victims of social trauma have suffered and aim to overcome are critical steps to processes of healing and reparation. However, state and institutional responses to refugee arrival significantly constrain the ability and desire of refugees to engage in public spheres. Many refugees lack awareness of their right to seek asylum or to pursue other options for resettlement, or face considerable barriers in accessing those options, which continues to fuel heavy flows of irregular migration and covert travel. Practices that foster *conscientization* disrupt common frameworks of

"illegality" or "victimhood" that dominate public discourse and create the potential for new mobility imaginaries to surface, sowing the seeds of new terms of migrant engagement within public and political spheres.

A lingering question in analyses of the migrant caravan movement and other acts of collective action for migrant rights is whether or not those who participation in movements will continue to engage in advocacy efforts in the future. In their discussion of collective migrant resistance that occurred along the Hungarian-Serbian border in 2015, Kallius and colleagues state: "It remains to be seen whether [collective action] will transform into political solidarities that will extend not only to other marginalized groups in the country but also to political opposition against the brutal asylum legislation…" (2016: 9).

My work has revealed that the caravan movement has played an essential role in ongoing efforts of collective activism and organizing among former *caravaneros.* Indeed, as I argue in **Chapter Five**, particularly robust efforts of social movement advocacy and organizing by LGBTQ *caravaneros* is helping to reshape the broader movement for Latino LGBTQ rights in the United States. This has been so effective largely as a result of youth's intersectional approach to rights-based discourse and their ongoing efforts to harness the power of personal testimony. Their skills of engaging young generations and venturing into broader public spheres, including diverse modes of self-representation and narrative practices, were born and cultivated through specific practices carried out during the course of the caravan movement, including video campaigns, in-depth group discussions, and media engagement.

The migrant caravan movement made it possible for hundreds of Central American asylum seekers to arrive at the US-Mexico border in relative safety. In conversations with *caravaneros* during the 2017 and 2018 caravans, I often asked them where they thought they

would be if the caravan had not occurred. The most common response was, “I would still be stuck in Tapachula.” Today, many of those *caravaneros*, among some of my closest interlocutors, reside in the US where they await asylum hearings. I constantly see posts appear on my Facebook stream by these individuals, who are now starting new lives in diverse locations across the US, in which they are celebrating important life moments and personal achievements (e.g., getting their driver’s license, having a baby, experiencing snow for the first time). *Chicas trans* discuss aspirations to become lawyers and activists to help fight for the rights of others like them; mothers discuss the importance of accessing medical care and education for their children. However, I would be remiss were I to say that the transition has been easy or without sadness and strife. There have also posts in which they reflect on the difficulties of integrating and staying afloat as an asylum seekers in a foreign land; express nostalgia and concern for their homelands; and where they display, all too frequently, the black ribbons that signify the death of a loved one back home.

Challenges and Resistance to the Migrant Caravan Movement

Since the time of my fieldwork, northbound caravans have continued to evolve and have grown substantially in number. The most recent caravan that departed from Honduras in mid-January 2021 has up to 9,000 participants. This is a significant jump from the 1,500 *caravaneros* that traveled through Mexico in April 2018, as well as the proceeding 5,000-member caravan in October 2018. The spike in numbers has been largely attributed to consistently high rates of extreme violence in Honduras, in addition to the sweeping destruction of homes and livelihoods spurred by climatic change and recent natural disasters (Biggs and Galiano-Rios 2019; Leutert 2018). As reported in the popular French news outlet, *Le Monde* (Chabas 2018): "Caught between extreme poverty and ultra-violence, more and more Hondurans are choosing to flee their

country, driven by the most extreme despair." The article then quotes an opposition Honduran politician who states that migrants "do not run after the American dream, they flee the Honduran nightmare."

In response, beginning in 2018, the Trump administration took an iron-fist approach to curtail northbound caravan mobility, initially justifying the deterrence and exclusion of international asylum seekers through alarmist discourse about the impending “invasion” of criminals and terrorists at the US-Mexico border (although this was clearly a strategy used for political gain)[19]. This was carried out, first, by pressuring Mexican and Central American governments to either take aggressive action or else face the retraction of tens of millions of dollars of US aid; and second, through the deployment of thousands of US military troops along both of Mexico’s borders.

The compliance of the Mexican government in deterring the migrant caravan movement has been particularly robust. Alongside more coercive strategies to immobilize northbound migrants, such as through the “Stay at Home” initiative that guaranteed temporary work permits to migrants who agreed to settled in southern Mexico states, the government has also orchestrated overt acts of repression and intimidation of caravan organizers and activists. For example, in 2018, two of the caravan’s most active and long-standing organizers (both Mexican citizens) were apprehended, beaten, and jailed by Mexican law enforcement officials. They were then tried in court for “human trafficking,” facing a potential life-term sentence. Fortunately, as a result of overwhelming evidence of innocence, and with the support of a robust network of national and international allies, the two activists were eventually liberated, although they continue to suffer emotional and psychological sequelae of the trauma of their arrests and contend with ongoing government surveillance.

In the current political moment, winter 2021, regional alliances made between the US, Mexico, and Central American countries to bar northbound migrant caravans continue to be upheld. Aggressive actions are justified by authorities through tired, old tropes that blame migrants for the spread of disease. As Mark Morgan, the acting commissioner of Customs and Border Protection, tweeted on the 16th of January, 2021: "Guatemala continues to support the regional alliance committed to safe, orderly, and legal migration and protect public health during the global pandemic" (Semple and Wirtz 2021). This is not to say that there is no reasonable concern for the spread of COVID-19 facilitated by mass mobility. However, there is a long history within US politics of the exclusion of migrants and refugees in the name of public health and disease prevention as a way to divert public attention from systemic, long-standing human rights abuses and deterrence of vulnerable populations seeking international protection (e.g., before COVID, it was the arrival of "terrorists,") (Markel and Stern 1999; Welshman 2006).

In his first few months as president, President Biden has made ambitious promises to overhaul current immigration laws. This includes efforts to create a path to citizenship for up to 11 million undocumented immigrants currently residing in the United States, intensified efforts to reunite families that were separated at the border, and aid for Central American economies to help address root causes of emigration. However, how and to what extent these promises will be fulfilled remains to be seen. The reaction of the Biden administration to the imminent arrival of the current migrant caravan to the US-Mexico border, may pose an "early test" to these claims (Semple & Wirtz 2021).

Future Recommendations

Moving forward, an adequate political response to the atrocities that Central Americans face in their efforts to seek international protection will require concerted, direct action by US,

Mexico, and Central American States. Specifically:

1) US Measures to uphold the principle of non-refoulement and other fundamental human rights

First of all, these governments should be held accountable to conform to international standards of refugee protection as proscribed in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. According to the principles of international agreements, countries should protect the rights of asylum seekers and guarantee that they are treated humanely and with dignity. This includes measures that prevent the forced return of refugees to *any place* (not exclusive to their countries of origin) where their lives or freedom are at risk (National Immigration Forum 2020). Furthermore, state governments should adhere to UNHCR guidelines that state that "detention should be exceptional and a measure of last resort" (UNHCR 2017: 105).

In accordance with these key tenets, the US government should immediately defund and disarm the MPP program, followed by robust investigation and congressional hearings into the abuses caused by MPP. Aggressive action should also be taken to address human rights abuses that have occurred within detention centers, including the immediate release and resettlement of jailed children and minors; the development of a comprehensive program to reunite families separated at the border; strict protocols and immediate action to protect detained migrants from the contraction and spread of COVID-19; and thorough investigation into the medical negligence and forced medical procedures (esp. sterilization) of detained migrants, as well as reparations for these atrocities.

The US should also cease to impose a neo-colonist approach to international relations to influence Mexico migration policy and enforcement through threats to initiate economic sanctions or through other coercive actions. In 2019, the US government relayed to Mexico that

the US would impose 5 percent tariffs on all Mexican imports if Mexico did not agree to deploy thousands of National Guard troops to the northern and southern Mexico borders. This resulted in an immediate spike in rates of migrants detained by INM. In fact, just a month after Mexico and US signed the migration plan, INM reached the highest number of detentions made in one month over the past thirteen years (30,000 detained migrants) (Schmidtke 2020). This is particularly concerning in light of extensive documentation by human rights groups of corruption, abuse, deliberate withholding of information about the refugee process, and even active discouragement towards migrants from pursuing refugee status carried out by INM agents (Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) 2019; Schmidtke 2020).

Funding and programming support by the both could also be redirected from increased border militarization towards addressing root causes of migration in Central American countries. This could include programs to build the economy and create jobs; to address the destruction of agriculture and infrastructure caused by climate change and natural disaster; and to strengthen efforts to reduce the staggering rates of violence, impunity, and political corruption that force Central Americans to flee.

2) Improvements for a more effective, humane approach to international protection in Mexico

Secondly, there are a number of steps that Mexico should take to achieve a more effective and human rights centered approach to the management of Central American migration. Funding for COMAR must be expanded significantly in order to process refugee cases in a timely manner and prevent prolonged delays and backlogs. According to Andres Ramirez, the head of COMAR, the budget for COMAR would need to be increased by USD $5 million dollars (compared to its current USD $1.2 million dollar budget) in order to have the capacity to receive and process current asylum requests of the over 50,000 refugee claimants currently in Mexico (WOLA 2019,

2020). In place of the massive amounts of US funding and resources directed toward border militarization, US-based support and internal resources of the Mexico government should be directed towards strengthening the Mexican refugee system, including the capacity to double staff, improve training, and make substantial increases in the institutional resources available.

There should also be substantial investment by the Mexico government in ensuring certain guarantees for safe and dignified conditions in which refugees await during the application process. This includes, but is not exclusive to:

- Heightened efforts to prevent victimization and crime directed toward migrants seeking international protection, including investigation and prosecution of unlawful acts. This must include timely and adequate responses to claims of victimization and crime committed by law enforcement agents and within institutional sites.
- Improved access of migrants seeking international protection to the transferal of refugee cases to other Mexico states. Transfers should be approved and facilitated within a reasonable time frame and should be granted for a wide range of humanitarian reasons, including migrant experiences with violence and crime, as well as perceptions of personal insecurity in the southern border region. Relatedly, COMAR capacity should be expanded within major cities, such as Mexico City, to accommodate shifts in the case load of transferred refugee cases.
- The development of programs to support asylum seekers who have been returned to Mexico as a result of the MPP, with a focus on improved access to housing, healthcare, and education.
- Increased staff training, resources, and oversight within humanitarian institutions of migrant aid and assistance to ensure that migrants have access to equitable and human

rights-centered services and resources. This must also include measures to regulate institutions and hold them accountable for the implementation of policies and laws designed for migrant protection and assistance (e.g., access to abortion services following an act of sexual violence).

- Direct involvement of migrants themselves in imagining and enacting refugee and migrant policy and aid.

3) Protection and mobility of migrant caravans in Mexico

Finally, State governments must guarantee the safe and unhindered movement of migrants traveling in caravans, including specific measures to demilitarize State responses to migrant caravans and to protect in-transit migrants from violence, exploitation, organized crime, and arbitrary detention. States should also agree to additional stipulations for the protection of vulnerable populations in the caravan, such as unaccompanied minors or people with disabilities. In recent caravans, including the caravan that departed from Honduras in mid-January, 2021, with upwards of 7,000 people, there has been extensive documentation by human rights observers and members of the media of repressive and harmful practices carried out by government agents towards caravan participants. This includes excessive use of force (e.g., riot shields, pepper spray) and physical blockades; arbitrary detainment and deportation of migrants and caravan leaders; and the failure to apply protocols to identify protections needs of vulnerable populations (esp., children traveling in the caravan). Such actions jeopardize the safety and wellbeing of the migrant population, and fail to uphold migrants' right to seek international protection, based on domestic and international law.

Furthermore, in the context of the most recent, ongoing caravan, repressive State actions have been justified and extended on the grounds of protection measures against COVID,

including warnings issued by Mexico's INM that migrants could receive 5-10 years of imprisonment for exposing others to the risk of infection. However, this goes in direct opposition to guidelines issued by the UNHCR in March 2020, which recognize the validity of State measures to implement health screenings and/or to require quarantine to people entering the country as long as such measures do not "result in denying them an effective opportunity to seek asylum or result in refoulement" (UNHCR 2020). Alternative approaches to infectious disease prevention should be employed, such as distributing protective equipment (e.g., face masks, hand sanitizer) and initiating vaccination campaigns along caravan routes.

This is not to say that there should be no regulation along national borders or procedures for individuals seeking international protection and legal status. However, because Mexico continues to face substantial challenges in providing adequate protection for international refugees, migrants should not be deterred from applying for asylum in the United States – particularly when deterrence takes the form of a gauntlet of incredibly high risks to one's personal security and wellbeing. Until access to human mobility is recognized as a fundamental human right and key source of social stratification, insidious processes of power and repression will continue to endure, bolstered and reproduced by frameworks of "legality," "national security," and "citizenship." Such frameworks cloak access to mobility under a language of legal and bureaucratic obligations and rights. However, as I have endeavored to demonstrate throughout the dissertation, struggles for mobility reflect much higher stakes about the right to a life worth living. As articulated in the popular Latino call for resistance: *"No queremos sobrevivir; queremos vivir"* ["We don't want to just survive; we want to live"]. Struggles for mobility are struggles for a way of life that includes more than sheer survival, but also existential well being, the opportunity for civic and community engagement, and the capacity to reach

towards personal and collective aspirations. Such are the mobility imaginaries heralded by migrants who brave the overwhelming odds against them to search for a better life.

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Endotes

[1] US Border Patrol Statistics: https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters
[2] Prior to 1996, grounds for deportation of a non-citizen were limited to aggravated felonies (e.g., homicide, drug trafficking). The Illegal Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act of 1996 extended the grounds for deportation through the inclusion of 28 additional offenses, including any violent crime with a jail sentence of one or more years. It also increased the number of deportation cases that could be subjected to expedited removal processes, which bypass judicial review (Perez 2015).
[3] According to a UNHCR report in 2016 on the southern Mexico border, one out of every three migrant women interviewed was fleeing gender-based violence.
[4] The US government has encouraged Mexico to "do the very thing that congressional oversight and legal protections prevent US authorities from doing: quickly deport to some of the most dangerous countries in the world thousands of children and families without giving them a chance to seek protection" (Meyer & Boggs 2015: 33).
[5] The principal of *non-refoulement* is included in the Mexico's 2011 Law on Refugees. It states that the Mexican government is obligated to *not* return an individual seeking refugee status to one's country of origin if his or her life would be threatened by the return due to "generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violations of human rights, or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order" (Meyer & Boggs 2015: 33-34).
[6] In 2016, 91.6% of refugee applications were presented by people from Central America's Northern Triangle (FMC 2017).

[8]According to UNHCR report published in 2020, Mexico's INM has registered more than 66,000 unaccompanied children from northern Central America over the last five years. However, only 2,000 (3%) of these unaccompanied minors ultimately sought asylum, raising pressing questions about youth's access to accurate information about and assistance in applying for refugee status.
[9] A "*mesera*" (also known in some parts of Mexico as a "*fichera*") is a woman who works in a bar and sells tickets ("*fichas*") to men to allow them to buy them drinks, dance or converse with them. Sometimes women's services are limited to companionship, although they may also entail formal and informal commercial sex work, depending on the specific context.
[10] Solitary confinement
[11] Between February-May, 2017, the number of undocumented migrants apprehended at the southern US border fell by 60% compared to the same period last year (US Customs and Border Protection 2017).
[12] After initial stays in migrant shelters consisting of 2-4 weeks, most men and women find housing in migrant communities that lie on the outskirts of the city where the costs of living are more affordable. A typical rental consists of a single-room basic cinderblock structure with leaky corrugated tin rooftops and windows without panes blocked by rod iron bars. Some include a small room with a single toilet; others have a shared bathroom. Since the apartments come unfurnished and migrants arrive with limited possessions, the accommodations are sparse. Most people sleep on a single sleeping bag on the concrete floor and cook simple meals of beans and tortillas on a single burner stovetop. The rudimentary material composition of the housing structure and the lack of circulating air draw a sweltering heat into the apartments during the day.
[13] The one exception is the *Arcoiris* pilot program at the Casa Belen migrant shelter in Tapachula. Through this program migrants can receive three-months of training in trades such as sewing, beauty, and refrigerator maintenance. At course completion, students receive a trade certificate and a 2-year work permit.
[14] *La bestia* is a colloquial reference to the northbound cargo train that continues to be one of the most common and consistent means of clandestine travel through Mexico for migrants.

[15] Here we see how, similar to Crowley-Matoka and Hamdy's (2015) study on gendered experiences of organ transplantation, ideologies of gender and motherhood are leveraged as a "cultural technology" to encourage women's compliance with refugee procedures (2016: 34).
[16] In 2020, the asylum process became increasingly complicated by the US government's Migration Protection Protocol (MPP) policies. As a result, many migrants who arrive in Tijuana to seek asylum are now forced to reside in makeshift camps on the Mexico side of the border and to seek temporary employment until their court hearing.
[17] This is not to assert that all LGBTQ youth avoid or are unable to access institutional assistance in Mexico. On the contrary, a few of my interlocutors were granted asylum in Canada through a special refugee resettlement program for LGBTQ, a process that was made possible by the assistance of local United Nations refugee agencies (ACNUR) and their organizational affiliates across Mexico. However, this was by far the exception.
[18] *Testimonio* is described as a specific artistic genre widely used within Latinx feminist approaches to social justice, which links "the spoken word to social action and privileges the oral narrative of personal experience as a source of knowledge, empowerment, and political strategy for claiming rights and bringing about social change" (Benmayor, Torruellas, & Juarbe, 1997, p. 153).
[19] Efforts of the US government to stop the "invasion" of supposed criminals and terrorists traveling in the caravans was a major talking point for Trump and his supporters leading up to the 2018 mid-term elections. However, commentators have noted that following the elections, mention of the caravans on Fox news dropped significantly (Rupar 2018).